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**ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENTALISM:**

ULRIKE OTTINGER'S *JOHANNA D'ARC OF MONGOLIA* AND *FREAK ORLANDO*

AND HUBERT FICHTE'S *PETERSILIE* AND *DIE PALETTE*

by

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Michael G. Levine and Gabriele M. Schwab

And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Ethnographic Experimentalism:

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and Hubert Fichte's *Petersilie* and *Die Palette*

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This dissertation explores the registers in which German filmmaker and artist Ulrike Ottinger (1942-) and writer Hubert Fichte (1935-86) push the boundaries of the representation of others – both non-European cultural others, as well as the silenced internal others of Europe and Germany – and the kind of aesthetic strategies they use to challenge the normative discourses about these others. I contend that their use of experimental aesthetic strategies foreground aspects of indeterminacy and relationality that are invariably a basic but often concealed part of cross-cultural encounters as well as of normative practices dominant within a culture. I do this by examining two of Ottinger's films – *Freak Orlando* (1981) and *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989) – and two of Fichte's poetic ethnographic works – *Die Palette* (1968) and *Petersilie* (1980). The choice of these four works – in each case, one work on non-European cultures and one on Europe's own marginalized, persecuted and silenced others – serve to identify the framing principle of the other, be it Europe's external or internal others.

Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte are both known for their ethnographic approach, and the reception of their works tends to divide their oeuvre into early and later phases. It is the later phase, engaging with non-European cultures, that gets categorized with its perceived distance to Europe as ‘ethnographic’. I examine, instead, how both artists challenge traditional ethnographic discourse and how their ethnographic interest is also reflected in their early works and not only in the later ones.

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## Introduction

*“Poetisch freilegen, meine ich – nicht zupoetisieren.”* (Hubert Fichte)

*“An experimental system has more stories to tell than the experimenter at a given moment is trying to tell with it. It not only contains submerged narratives, the story of its repressions and displacements; as long as it remains a research system, it also has not played out its excess. Experimental systems contain remnants of older narratives as well as fragments of narratives that have not yet been told. Grasping at the unknown is a process of tinkering; it proceeds not so much by completely doing away with old elements or introducing new ones but rather by re-moving them, by an unprecedented concatenation of the possible(s). It differs/defers.”* (Hans-Jörg Rheinberger)

This dissertation is an investigation of the experimental strategies used by Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte and the implications of these strategies both for traditional ethnographic representations of non-European cultures as well as for Europe’s silenced internal others. I do this by examining two of Ottinger’s films – *Freak Orlando* (1981) and *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* (1989) – and two of Fichte’s poetic ethnographic works – *Die Palette* (1968) and *Petersilie* (1980). The choice of these four works – in each case, one work on non-European cultures and one on Europe’s own marginalized, persecuted and silenced others – serve to identify the framing principle of the other, be it Europe’s external or internal others. I contend that their use of aesthetic strategies of excess and fragment foreground aspects of indeterminacy, performance, and relationality that are



invariably a basic but often concealed part of cross-cultural encounters as well as normative practices dominant within a culture.<sup>1</sup>

Ulrike Ottinger (1942- ) has been described as a unique filmmaker “who combines an outlaw's spirit and an ethnographer's eye with an artist's sense of wonder.”<sup>2</sup> She grew up in Konstanz in postwar Germany, and started work early on with painting and photography, especially during her stay in Paris in the 1960s. She turned to films in the 1970s, after having returned to West Germany and having founded an art gallery, press, and “filmclub visuell” in Konstanz before eventually moving to Berlin. Her early films include the female pirate-film *Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin* (1977), as well as *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (1979), *Freak Orlando* (1981), and *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* (1984). In the mid-eighties, the location of her films moved primarily to East Asia and gave way to a number of long documentary films such as *China. Die Künste – Der Alltag* (1985), *Taiga* (1991/92), *Exil Shanghai* (1997), *Die koreanische Hochzeitstruhe* (2009), etc. Critics frequently tend to speak of an ethnographic turn distinguishing her later films from her early surrealist ones, a number of which are set in Berlin. Her ethnographic gaze, however, is as present in her early films shot in Germany as it is in most of the later ones shot in Asia, a fact that Ottinger herself remarks upon in various interviews.

Hubert Fichte (1935-1986) grew up in Hamburg in National Socialist Germany as a “Mischling ersten Grades” and later worked as a child artist in the local theater with his

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, their unified interests in destabilizing the naturalization of the norm and foregrounding relationality make it difficult for us to even speak in terms of ‘culture’, ‘cross-cultural’ encounters, or external and internal others. Yet, given that the import of Ottinger’s and Fichte’s critique works precisely because the fiction of culture as a bounded, homogenous system has very real effects, I continue to use these categories in order to unpack the implications of their aesthetic strategies.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Camhi. “The Films of Ulrike Ottinger.” *The Village Voice*. January 26, 1999. <http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-01-26/film/the-films-of-ulrike-ottinger/> Retrieved on March 2, 2013.

mother. His early novels (such as *Das Waisenhaus*, *Detlevs Imitationen*, *Die Palette*, *Versuch über die Pubertät*) engage with his childhood, his homosexuality, and the subcultures of Hamburg's red-light districts. Fichte was also keenly interested in the sexual subcultures and syncretic religious practices found in Caribbean, South American, and African communities, where he frequently travelled in the 1970s with his photographer life-partner Leonore Mau. His later ethnographic works were mainly published after his death in 1986 (compiled in his multi-volume work titled *Die Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit*). His interest in the non-Europe is also designated by some critics as the ethnographic turn that marked these later works, even though it is difficult to clearly separate his autobiographies from his ethnographies. As has been pointed out by others, Fichte considered an engagement with the self as necessarily intertwined with an engagement with the other, and his works sought to go beyond the binary division between the two.

Due to the experimental nature of their works, both Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte unfortunately still remain mostly unknown in mainstream German Studies. And yet, both of them have been widely recognized within artistic and literary circles for their avant-garde oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> While on the one hand, their works deal with marginalized subcultures (such as, immigrant, gay, urban subcultures), on the other hand, both artists also travel widely outside Germany – to Mongolia, China, Africa, and Latin America – and show a consistent engagement with non-European cultures in their novels and films. Though there now exists a relatively small but solid body of work on each of the two,

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<sup>3</sup> Hubert Fichte was awarded the Hermann Hesse Prize (1965) and the Alexander Zinn Prize (1985). Ulrike Ottinger's work has received worldwide attention and has been exhibited at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Some of her films have received the Audience Jury Prize in Montréal, the Bundesfilmpreis (Visual Design) and the German Film Critics Award.

there have been no full-length studies yet that have looked at Ottinger's and Fichte's works in conversation with each other.<sup>4</sup> The fact that they share very similar preoccupations (gay subcultures, ethnographic modes, the non-European other, the concept of knowledge and how aesthetics informs this concept), influences (Surrealism, Early German Romanticism), and strategies (bricolage, palimpsest of time and space) makes this connection even more compelling. This dissertation explores these connections and the kinds of aesthetic strategies both artists employ in order to portray otherness and to challenge predominant epistemological strategies.

Ottinger and Fichte are connected in their persistent interest in that which exists on the margins but defines the center. They not only engage with Germany's internal others in their works but also with the non-European others that come to define Europe's idea of itself. Their choice of ethnographic modes for their texts and films, simultaneously challenge and subvert the traditional functioning of categories, both at the level of disciplines – anthropology and literature, discourses – scientific and poetic, and media – film and print. On a broader level, this project is also about how aesthetics can shape and reveal the political.

As previously noted, critics talk of a shift in both artists' works – in Fichte's case, from more autobiographical early novels to his later ethnographic work, whereas in Ottinger's case, the focus is seen as moving from her early "theatrical extravagances" to her later "mode of carefully observed documentary".<sup>5</sup> Yet, Ottinger's and Fichte's ethnographic interest is independent of location and, therefore, such classifications reveal

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of their works in relation to their queer subtext, see Katrin Sieg's chapter on "Queer Colonialism: Ethnographic Authority and Homosexual Desire" in her book *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> "Tales of a Wandering Camera. Films of Ulrike Ottinger." Harvard Film Archive. 10.18.2009. <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2009octdec/ottinger.html> Retrieved in May, 2012.

more about our notions of what constitutes the ethnographic, the theatrical, the autobiographical, and the authentic. This demarcation is not as clear as it is made out to be for either of them. In fact, it is their continued preoccupation with the ethnographic mode, their aesthetics of openness, as well as their emphasis on the politics of cultural contact and silences that enables their style to resist an easy classification of fictional or documentary, theatrical or ethnographic, scientific or poetic. This dissertation is an exploration of how their aesthetic strategies destabilize habituated perceptions.

The first of this dissertation's three chapters begins with an overview of European travel writing. Although these narratives themselves transformed with changing historical conditions, many of the tropes and perspectives contained in them continue to persist in various forms. Their influence on the cultural imaginary of Europe later also extended to other media as new technologies (radio, film, television) emerged and became more predominant in the twentieth century. Since Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte both interrogate such cultural imaginaries (about other non-European cultures as well as Europe's and Germany's own self-image), this overview helps in understanding the basis of their critique. Given the experimental nature of their works and the manner in which they play with representation and non-referentiality, I shall also briefly delineate the concepts and problems of representation that are at stake in this play. The final section of this chapter contains a discussion of the concepts of excess and fragment – which I take to be central to understanding Ottinger's and Fichte's work respectively – and links them to how and to what purpose indeterminacy is engendered in their films and texts. I also discuss the surrealist moment in ethnography and the idea of the experimental system, both of which help to understand the two approaches that connect the two artists – their

ethnographic interest (in the self and the other) and their use of experimentalism in the service of this interest.

Chapter 2 focuses on two films by Ulrike Ottinger which were made almost a decade apart. In the 1981 film *Freak Orlando*, Ottinger sets out to interrogate two thousand years of European history through a “world theater” that inverts conventional historiography by narrating this history through the very populations that have been the target of violence through the centuries. We thus see characters ranging from dwarves, cross-dressers, the physically disabled, homosexuals, natural and artificial “freaks”, mentally ill, etc – the very groups that have long been marginalized historically, including their twentieth century persecution in National Socialist Germany. On the other hand, these figures also evoke the phantasmagoria of early European travel narratives, which relied on stories of monsters and “freaks” in far off lands. Ottinger confronts the power of these cultural imaginaries in her 1989 work *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* which she sets on a train in the first part and in the Mongolian steppes in the latter, longer part of the film. In a surprising turn, in *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*, Ottinger inverts the conventional ethnographic perspective by foregrounding the gaze of the Mongolian women on the “exotic” European/American women. The film’s formal experimental style, surrealist techniques, and extreme stylization represent the “other” in an almost baroque exuberance that draws on conventions ranging from magical realism to surrealist collage techniques. I read both films through the concept of excess in its various connotations: excess as the superfluous, as exceeding or carrying over, and as exaggeration, and I discuss the implications that arise from the varying ways it is employed in this film – through repetitions, marginalized groups, and reworking of the

mythical in contemporary settings. This mode of cinematographic representation challenges and in some ways interrupts habituated modes of perception.

The themes of fragment, relationality, and non-essentialism are central to Chapter 3. It analyzes two of Hubert Fichte's works which represent his ideas of poetic anthropology. In the first work discussed in this chapter – *Die Palette* (1968) – Fichte aims to chronicle the particular subculture of a popular bar called Palette in the red light district of St Pauli in Hamburg in the 1960s. *Die Palette* is divided into 76 sections, each of which oscillate between various time periods, places, and people. Each section, in fact, is richly layered, and constantly juxtaposes different fragments and intertextual references to avoid a linear narrative that can be reduced to the dominance of one element or perspective. By doing so, Fichte is not only able to present the everyday lives of the homosexuals, prostitutes, pimps, and immigrants, that the narrator Jäcki (whose biographical references are conspicuously superimposed with the author's own publically known ones) befriends in the bar, but is also able to reflect upon suppressed histories of Germany (for instance, of the National Socialist past and its continuation in postwar Germany under K.G. Kiesinger),<sup>6</sup> and its internal others. In *Petersilie* (1980), the other work I look at in this chapter, Fichte makes greater use of the strategy of fragments. Based on his ethnographic research on the Afro-American syncretic religious rituals in Santo Domingo, Haiti, Miami, and Venezuela, this work is composed of snippets of conversations, newspaper articles, interviews with local politicians, staccato descriptions of trance ceremonies, phone book entries, supermarket prices, litanies, and so on. Fichte's aesthetic of the fragment provides a way to understand the various elements he sets in

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<sup>6</sup> Kurt Georg Kiesinger, affiliated with the National Socialist Party during the Third Reich, later went on to become the Chancellor of West Germany from 1958-1966.

play in order to deconstruct essentialist binaries and to critique existing modes of narrativizing non-European others in the fields of literature and human sciences. We shall see that Fichte's works, like Ottinger's, function as an experimental system which, by disrupting habitual modes,<sup>7</sup> manage to articulate that which is not fully acknowledged but yet forms a part of our lived and inherited experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> In *Imaginary Ethnographies* (2012), Gabriele Schwab extends Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's concept of experimental system, which is discussed later on in this dissertation. Schwab's framework of "imaginary ethnography", which emphasizes literature as a form of cultural contact, informs my interest in Ottinger's and Fichte's works. Literature (or by extension, film) functions as imaginary ethnography and can, according to Schwab, involve rewriting cultural narratives by using alternative signifying practices and unsettling the way we habitually see the world. Schwab's term applies to fictional models of cultural contact, and in the case of Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte, their respective textual as well as filmic models of cultural contact generate even more interesting questions, since they play with the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

## **Chapter I**

### **Shaking the Ethnographic Habitus: A Theoretical Overview**

The age of Enlightenment and the following two centuries that saw the rise of European colonialism along with an increasing institutionalization of the social sciences, came to redefine how Europeans who had the means to travel beyond Europe represented the non-European cultures they encountered. The recording of travel experiences, whether in the form of travel writing or of ethnographies, both contributed to and reflected the imperial and colonial discourses of the time. In the case of disciplines like Anthropology, many such narratives have traditionally staked their claim as definitive knowledge about non-European cultures. In the context of Europe's political and economic power based on its colonial conquests, these travel accounts worked as more than just subjective accounts. They eventually became equated with "objective", "scientific" knowledge and became part of the western cultural imaginary about non-European cultural others. Many of the ideas from this period continue to inform political and cultural discourses to date, so that we hear them resonating in the popular cultural stereotypes of former colonies that abound in mass culture, in contemporary news reportage of the non-West, and so on. It is this conflation of power and knowledge production, especially in the defining, categorizing, labeling, and often in the process, reifying of "other" peoples, that forms the background of my interest in the politics of representation and in the aesthetic strategies that could challenge these practices.



There is a considerable amount of critique of traditional ethnographies and the broader discipline of Anthropology. Its assumptions and prejudices were unpacked in the linguistic turn sparked by the *Writing Culture*<sup>8</sup> debate in North America. Within German Anthropology, however, not enough attention has been paid to literary or cinematic experiments<sup>9</sup> that anticipated this critique and attempted to come up with alternative aesthetic strategies to depict other cultures. The discipline, already burdened by its collusion with National Socialism and its association with race theories, likewise, paid scant attention to the way in which literary and cinematic experiments were turning the ethnographic gaze towards cultures within Germany. At the same time, Ulrike Ottinger and Hubert Fichte, with their sustained interests in ethnographic research (while being highly critical of its conventional modes), also focused on questions of normativity and power discourses. They brought this focus to both Germany's external and internal others. In doing so, they developed inventive strategies to question conventional accounts, counter institutionalized silences, and generate new modes of articulating experiences, histories, and affects.

Their interest in how dominant discourses naturalize the norm informs their engagement with not only the ethnographic traditions related to non-European external others but also how Europe or Germany defines the "normal" and portrays itself through erasures and absences in the history it tells of itself, through an institutionalized disciplining of the body, and by obscuring the continuous setting up of bare life at the center of sovereign power. Therefore, both Fichte and Ottinger have focused equally on

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<sup>8</sup> *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> A more recent exception to this can be found in Christoph Schmitt-Maaß. *Das gefährdete Subjekt. Selbst- und Fremdforschung in gegenwärtiger Ethnopoiesie*, 2007.

Europe's absent, marginalized and silenced internal others. As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, implicit in their work is the critique of the discourse of certainty that has frequently characterized Eurocentric narratives about non-European cultural others as well as Europe's, and specifically, Germany's own silenced others and their histories.

In the form of scientific functionalist ethnographies and films or as subjective records of the search for the self in foreign lands, such narratives have traditionally rested on unquestioned stereotypes (e.g., those revolving around binaries of rational-spiritual or of developed-undeveloped) and the idea of cultural authenticity. On the other hand, dominant cultural discourses and historiography in postwar Germany (for more than two decades following the end of the World War II) mostly rested on a positivist historicism, which continued "to disavow its [Holocaust's] existential and experiential impact"<sup>10</sup> even though it objectively<sup>11</sup> acknowledged the facts surrounding Germany's National Socialist past and the fate of its internal others. The silenced internal others included not only Germany's Jewish population and left-wing political rivals of National Socialists, but also homosexuals, gypsies, disabled, mentally ill, and others who did not fit in their idea of the "normal". The extermination of these groups in fact followed a history of persecution that can itself be related to an institutionalized intolerance of any deviation from codified norms. This link is highlighted in Ottinger's and Fichte's works as they engage with the powerful role of cultural imaginaries in dictating or mediating such

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriele Schwab. *Haunting Legacies. Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, 2010. (11)

<sup>11</sup> For an insightful discussion on objectivity and historiography in the context of traumatic histories like that of the Holocaust, see Dominick La Capra "Representing the Holocaust. Reflections of the Historian's Debate" (111) in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Saul Friedländer Ed., 1992. In the same volume, see also Eric L. Santner's essay "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." Gabriele Schwab incorporates their insights into her reading of various narratives that emerge from violent histories and "place their readers in an emotionally involved transferential relationship" (11) in *Haunting Legacies*, 2010.

encounters. Their emphasis on indeterminacy and performance – in their travel accounts beyond Europe to Latin America, Africa, and Asia but also in their focus on marginalized groups within Europe in their other works – not only interrogates the relation between knowledge and power, between culture and performance, but also aims to interrupt our own genre expectations by denying us access to wholeness and certainty in their narratives about their travels.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the development of travel writing in Germany, since literary accounts have been pivotal in influencing the cultural imaginaries of Europe for centuries. As a result, in the accounts of this period, a number of patterns in the representation of non-European cultural others emerge, whose historical development helps to understand the kind of representations and traditions that both Ottinger and Fichte challenge in their works. A brief look at the history of travel writing and ethnography in Europe makes it easier to see where they depart from (or continue) with these traditions.<sup>12</sup> The second section identifies some concepts that are at stake in the challenges posed by the experimental ethnographies of Ottinger and Fichte. This section locates their contribution within broader debates surrounding representation, culture, as well as poetic and scientific discourse. The third section engages with the aesthetic strategy of excess in Ottinger's works and that of the fragment in Fichte's as a way to foreground the heightened sense of indeterminacy that they invoke as a critique to narratives of normalcy that populate dominant discourses reflected in historiography, popular imagination, cultural codes, and so on, and which

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<sup>12</sup> For this reason, in the overview below, I focus on travel writing that concerned itself with non-European cultures. The relationship between Europe and North America followed a different trajectory and would need a separate discussion, so it is not a part of this overview. Because Anthropology as a discipline grew influential in North America, along with engendering critical debates about representation, those are part of the discussion here.

Ottinger and Fichte engage with in their works on the internal others. At the same time, these strategies are also used to critique narratives of certainty, authenticity, and objectivity that marked most traditional ethnographic representations of non-European cultures.

## **Section I: History of Travel Narratives**

Given the span of genres that a glance at the history of travel writing reveals, and given the fact that the author and the filmmaker under consideration here play with the boundaries of genres that usually define fiction and non-fiction, science and literature, I employ the terms travel narratives and travel accounts very loosely in this work, both in the case of written and filmic accounts. For this, I borrow from Tim Youngs' discussion of Peter Hulme's very basic definition of travel writing, which must relate a journey that has been made by its author (5).<sup>13</sup> Since travel writing has been widely recognized as a hybrid genre, this definition uses the source rather than the end product and proves more inclusive considering the fluidity of this genre. Unless referring to texts or films that specifically identify themselves as ethnographies, I apply these terms also to writings and films that have an implicit or explicit ethnographic interest in non-European cultures. By ethnographies, I mean those works that claim to convey epistemological insights about the cultures they describe – whether they do so through a totalizing scientific form or a poetic fragmentary one. I also use “anthropological” and “ethnographic” interchangeably throughout the thesis, a decision influenced by an adherence to Ottinger's and Fichte's own questioning of these conventions and their blurring of the boundaries between fiction

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Youngs. *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, 2013.

and non-fiction, the scientific and the poetic, and the process of production and the end-product.

As commercial and colonial patronage of travel became more common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries travel writing also gained greater popularity in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the relative democratization in education and technological developments in the fields of printing and transportation (like the railroad and motor car) also led to a broadening of the readership of travelogues. The authors of travel narratives were no longer just missionaries, geographers, established writers and court officials, but also members of the bourgeoisie and women travelers. In tandem with the growing popularity of the bourgeois travel writing the nineteenth century also witnessed the prevalence of amateur ethnographies. Importantly, as Tim Youngs points out, “armchair” scientists increasingly drew on traveler's reports to develop their theories at times providing instructions about research and reporting. This hybrid style of the personal and the scientific accounts in travel narrations, common since the early Modern travel writings, however, underwent a transformation by the end of the nineteenth century which witnessed the stark separation in the two functions of travel writings namely of informing and entertaining (56). Anthropology sought to establish itself as a science in Europe and North America. And the fashioning of ethnographies as a domain for specialists and professional anthropologists was largely influenced by positivist scientific methods, which lent themselves to the posing of these “experts” as neutral, objective and disinterested observers. Historians of travel writing have pointed out how this genre too was implicated in the connection between the Enlightenment power discourse and the

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<sup>14</sup> Nigel Leask. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1780-1840*, 2002.

idea of the supremacy of the western civilization, which was one of the bases of European colonial expansion. Travel writing – whether personal narratives or scientific ethnographies – were very much a part of this “age of discovery”, and the field of Anthropology at the time was firmly entrenched in the binary discourse of the civilized West and the primitive other (Porter 18).<sup>15</sup> According to critics of the genre, many of whom have underscored the “imperialist mode of representation” (Korte 153)<sup>16</sup> in travelogues, travel writing was “implicated in the reproduction of colonialism [...] by producing knowledge about the other and circulating colonial stereotypes” (Ghose 9).<sup>17</sup>

In the twentieth century, imperial certainties were challenged and the end of the colonial project loomed large as politicization and support for anti-colonial movements in North America and Europe gained popularity. This change in the socio-historical context was also reflected in Anthropology. For instance, in 1980s North American Anthropology, this culminated in a number of works which challenged the biases inherent in the claim to scientific objectivity promoted by traditional ethnographies.

In Germany, the developments in travel writing that dealt with non-European cultures were broadly similar to the trajectory outlined above but had some specific peculiarities. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although Germany did not have colonies comparable to that of Britain and France at the time, European groups had traveled to the “New World” as well as to the Far East. Germans participated in expeditions outside Europe as part of diplomatic delegations, as commissioned missionaries, researchers and soldiers, doing so almost entirely under foreign patronage

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<sup>15</sup> Denis Porter. *Haunted Journeys*, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, Catherine Matthias. Trans, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*, 1998.

(Osterhammel 229).<sup>18</sup> Travel writing was not yet established as a genre, but accounts of the time showed a strong ethnographic interest and served primarily as introductions to exotic lands and cultures otherwise inaccessible to most people. By the end of the sixteenth century, travel writings began to take on more scientific underpinnings. The accounts of Jürgen Andersen, Volquard Iversen, Adam Olearius (who also undertook the publication of a number of travel reports by his contemporaries under the patronage of Herzog Friedrich III of Gottorf), Paul Fleming, Johann Albrecht von Mandelsloh, Engelbert Kaempfer, and Heinrich von Üchteritz are considered by historians as some of the early examples in German travel writing that described journeys beyond Europe to Persia, India, East Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Brenner 125).<sup>19</sup> However, Peter Brenner points out that despite the scientific interest, the “Wissensdurst und Entdeckungsfreude,” and ethnographic interests that often constituted the motivation behind these individual travel accounts, the religious-moral reasoning still dominated such undertakings (127).

Travel writings in Germany developed a new self-consciousness of the genre as confidence over the accuracy of new kinds of geographical maps increased, the postal carriage made travel relatively more accessible, and the spread of Enlightenment ideas heightened the importance of travel to education, scientific discovery, and “Eroberung der Erde.” It is therefore no coincidence that within the field of German travel writing,

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<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, “Reisen an die Grenzen der Alten Welt. Asien im Reisebericht des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts”. *Der Reisebericht: die Entwicklung einer Gattung in der deutschen Literatur*, Ed. Peter J. Brenner, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Brenner also points out that the motivations behind journeys to the Orient differed substantially from those to America. While the latter was led by a sense of curiosity and discovery of the “New World”, travels to the Orient were loaded with old conceptions about it, since European contacts (both in terms of infrastructure and a specific “Orientbild”) existed already. However, given the changing nature of economic motivations which guided travels beyond Europe, these conceptions were also slowly undergoing some changes. Peter Brenner. *Die Reisebericht in der deutschen Literatur*, 1990.

the eighteenth century has been a widely researched area. Literary historians of this field characterize two major trends during this period. An emphasis on encyclopedic, scientific accounts, written in a factual manner, without literary ambitions, was evident in, for instance, Carsten Niebuhr's or Peter Simon Pallas's accounts of their scientific expeditions to Russia and the Near East in the 1760s. On the other hand, at the same time, as Peter Brenner notes (273), the establishment of the genre also gave rise to accounts like Goerg Foster's *Reise um die Welt* (1777) which sought to poeticize its descriptions and was self-conscious in its use of literary strategies.

As travel became considerably more widespread in the nineteenth century, the burden of information eased from this genre. It began to be used by writers as another literary genre for self-expression (Brenner 275). For German Romantics, travel occupied a central place both as a motif and as experience. Although not sharing in the impulse for scientific certainties that impelled Enlightenment interest in travel, while very much influenced by its sense of discovery, German Romantics considered travel as representing a search, albeit one that was endless. The aim here was a "nie erreichbare Ferne" and the journey itself was understood as a way of being ("Reisen als Daseinsform") (Pikulik 13).<sup>20</sup> At the same time there was also an increasing subjectivization of the journey as it came to be depicted as both internal and external journeys of the subject.

Although the focus here is travel writing about non-European cultures, Goethe's *Italienische Reise* is worth mentioning here because of its innovations and lasting influence on modern travel accounts that were to follow. It also illustrates a typical

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<sup>20</sup> Lothar Pikulik. „Das romantische Reisen“. *Reisen und Tourismus*. Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier. Sonderheft 3, Oktober 1979.



pattern in travel writings about foreign cultures. *Italienische Reise*, published in 1816, and describing Goethe's 1786-88 journeys to Italy, is celebrated for its varied themes as well as his innovative *Selbstinszenierung* which connects the external journey to the narrator's internal one. Though many scholars have described the importance of classical antiquity and Goethe's interest in Italy, Peter Sprengel notes in his afterword to Goethe's work: "Er ist bemüht, das Land der klassischen Antike als "Heimat" zu begreifen. Von diesem Ausgangspunkt her ist seine Reise von vornherein konzipiert, nicht als Begegnung mit dem Neuen" (531).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, despite its innovativeness compared to other travelogues of the time, Goethe seems more interested in the projected idealization of his image of the land of antiquity than he was with the contemporary social realities that confronted him in Italy. And in the instances that he does engage with them, they are explained within morphological categories of "Notwendigkeit" and "Unwillkürlichkeit" used to describe natural phenomena (538). In this regard, this work too reflects patterns similar to other European travel accounts dealing with non-European cultures which were more interested in an idealized past while also presenting their views as natural certainties. Along with Goethe, Heinrich Heine's *Reisebilder* is also considered important for the innovations it brought to the genre both in terms of form and content. This work by Heine is considered to be influenced both by the critical tradition of Enlightenment, evident in the social critique rendered in his work, as well its subjective aspects influenced by Romanticism (Brenner 443).

Among other important travel accounts, Alexander von Humboldt's and Adalbert von Chamisso's narratives of their early nineteenth century expeditions reveal the

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Sprengel. *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Italienische Reise. Mit einem Nachwort, einer Zeittafel zu Goethe, Anmerkungen und bibliographischen Hinweisen von Peter Sprengel*, 1986.

growing influence of an empirically driven objective scientific account while at the same time being influenced by the Romantic tradition in its “aesthetisierende Naturbetrachtung” (Schwarz 20)<sup>22</sup> and its “empirisch fundierte naturphilosophische Ganzheitsphilosophie” (Brenner 448). Along with travelogues that focused on descriptions of natural landscapes, this era saw those that dealt with cultural analysis (e.g. Alfred Wechsler’s *Indische Reise*). These are marked by a tendency towards *Innerlichkeit* (e.g. Hermann Bahr’s *Dalmatinische Reise*) emerging from a rejection of economic and political changes in Europe, while also exhibiting a “sublimierter Imperialismus” (568).<sup>23</sup> These larger economic changes implied the end of the era of private expeditions and an increasing institutionalization of social science research in Western Europe and Russia. By late nineteenth century, this became visible in Germany with the establishment of Ethnology as a discipline. Research expeditions and travel accounts came to be more professionalized, but as multiple studies have shown, these “scientific” accounts were still very much influenced by the traditionally received images of the non-West.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as Cornelia Essner’s work on German explorers in Africa has shown, the precarious financial backing of such expeditions also ensured that the focus was on spectacular findings that resonated with a broader public interest (26).<sup>25</sup> South America and Africa were the most popular destinations for German travelers and researchers of the time, not only as objects of scientific research but also as exotic entertainment. This is

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<sup>22</sup> This aspect is described by Egon Schwarz in his work on travel writings in nineteenth century and their attempt to strike a balance between scientific, secular, and religious elements. Egon Schwarz. “Naturbegriff und Weltanschauung. Deutsche Forschungsreisende im fruehen 19. Jahrhundert.” *Natur und Natuerlichkeit. Stationen des Gruenen in der deutschen Literatur*. Ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Srdan Bogosavljeric. *German Literary Travelogues around the Turn of the Century 1890-1914*, 1983. Cited by Brenner, 1990.

<sup>24</sup> This aspect is underscored by many of the contributions in *Exotische Welten. Europäische Phantasien*, Ed. Hermann Pollig, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Cornelia Essner. *Deutsche Afrikareisende im 19. Jahrhundert. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Reisens*, 1985.

evidenced in the popularity of *Völkerschau* in Germany at the time, where natives from these continents were exhibited for the general public, for instance, in the Tierpark Hagenbeck in Hamburg. Even though many of these nineteenth century travel narratives emerged from expeditions that took place before Germany had imperial interests in Africa, they still exhibited a belief in European superiority and its civilizing mission guided by Christian beliefs and Enlightenment rationality. However, the “personal” and the “literary” influences in these narratives were played down in favor of a scientific and seemingly more objective style.

As Brenner points out, similar aspects are also evident in the case of the few individual explorations during this period. An example is the geographer Ferdinand von Richtofen, who travelled to China in the late eighteenth century and published many articles and books, including his travel journals and a popular “Führer für Forschungsreisende”. Richtofen borrowed heavily from traditional accounts of seventeenth century, including those fabricated by geographers who had never travelled to East Asia. Jürgen Osterhammel’s analysis of Richtofen’s travel accounts has highlighted how even when a more subjective narrative did appear within the seemingly objective scientific perspective in his travel accounts, they were guided by an imperial self-understanding and had considerable influence on the image of East Asia conveyed to the German public. Thus, the trend was a continued reliance on *Vorwissen*, on the invented image of the non-European other such as that of the hypersexualized African that served as *Pornographieersatz* (Thiel 87).<sup>26</sup> Edward Said analyzes this aspect of the Orientalist discourse and distinguishes it from the characteristic, evident in all cultures, of

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<sup>26</sup> Franz Josef Thiel. „Der Exotismus in Bezug auf Mission und Kolonialismus.“ *Exotische Welten. Europäische Phantasien*. Ed. Hermann Pollig, 1987.

imposing “corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free floating objects into units of knowledge”. The problem, according to him, is not merely this conversion, but rather that this process is institutionalized, taught, and supported by “prevailing cultural and political norms of the West” (331).<sup>27</sup> Although Germany didn’t have the large imperial possessions that Britain and France did, Said points out that it shared with them “a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient within Western culture” (19).

Travel narratives and ethnographies thus were characterized by the co-existence of the two elements of scientific authority and its claim to objectivity on the one hand, and the prevalence, even privileging of constructed, generalized symbols standing in for entire cultures and landscapes on the other. These views continue to hold sway in the ways these cultures are perceived in popular imagination. In her insightful work, Stefanie Ohnesorg<sup>28</sup> summarizes this characteristic that informed travel writing of the time:

Vor diesem Bewußtsein – d.h. dem als Wahrheit angenommenen, angelesenen *Vorwissen*, das je nach individuellem Bedarf und Ermessen ausgelegt und den kulturell eigenen Bedürfnissen angepaßt werden konnte, machten sich im 19. Jahrhundert viele Reisende auf, um die imaginierten Geheimnisse und Phantasma dieser ‚anderen‘ Welt am eigenen Leibe zu erfahren. Dem Orientreisenden bot dieser vorgegebene Rahmen einer hierarchischen Gegenüberstellung von *superiorem Okzident* und *inferiorem modernem Orient*, der mit Märchenphantasien, Träumen über die ‚Wiege der eigenen Kultur‘, sexuellen Konnotationen usw. individuell belegt werden konnte, ein ausreichend großes Potential, seine *orientalischen Träume* – zumindest bis zur Konfrontation mit der Realität – aufrecht zu erhalten. (212)

According to Brenner, by early twentieth century, there was a renewal of interest in the Orient, with nationalist and imperial tendencies on the one hand and cosmopolitanism

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<sup>27</sup> Said is careful not to essentialize the Occident in the process of critiquing Orientalism; his use of the term “West” in this case therefore specifically refers to the British, French, American, and German traditions that he studies in his work *Orientalism*. For a more detailed defense to the charge that he may be essentializing the Occident, see Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (1978), 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Stefanie Ohnesorg. *Mit Kompaß, Kutsche und Kamel*, 1996.

and *Technikeuphorie* on the other (as evident, for instance, in the works of Norbert Jacques and Alfons Paquet). Another characteristic that came to define the travel genre in the mid and late nineteenth century was an increased influence of the “historische und volkskundliche Denken” in social sciences and humanities that focused on travel narratives that dealt with realities within Germany (Brenner 549). This also came to be reflected in the development of Anthropology as a discipline in Germany,<sup>29</sup> which was divided into two fields, one which focused on exotic cultures, and the other on an idealized folk culture: Volkskunde, (now called “europäische Ethnologie”),<sup>30</sup> catered to the study of European cultures, and Völkerkunde (now called “Ethnologie”) focused on non-European cultures. Given the prevalence of the humanist division between the cultured European rational man (Haller 35)<sup>31</sup> and the primitive/natural non-Europeans (35),<sup>32</sup> it is no surprise that these two disciplines have been described as “Geschichte nicht stattgefundenener Begegnungen” (35).<sup>33</sup>

German Anthropology was particularly invested in film and photographs, and research films shot by German and Austrian anthropologists during their expeditions in Africa and New Guinea towards the turn of the twentieth century are some of the most extensive ethnographic records available of that time. The idea that cinema could provide a purer access to reality (Oksiloff 8)<sup>34</sup> was also in line with the influence of French

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<sup>29</sup> Gesellschaft fuer Voelkerkunde was established in 1929 and was the forerunner of Deutsche Gesellschaft der Voelkerkunde (DGV), which organises both Voelkerkunde as well as Volkskunde (dgv) under its umbrella. For more on the development of this institution, see Dieter Haller. *Die Suche nach dem Fremden - Geschichte der Ethnologie in der Bundesrepublik 1945-1990*, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Dieter Haller, 2012. Cf. Zimmermann, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> As Haller points out, women were also excluded from this category since they were seen as associated with ‘nature’ rather than culture. Dieter Haller, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Kant as cited by Dieter Haller. 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Dieter Haller. 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Assenka Oksiloff. *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema*, 2001.

anthropologist Felix-Louis Regnault's ideas of making ethnology a precise science. Klaus Kreimeier<sup>35</sup> summarizes Regnault's ideas thus:

Er stellte die Soziologie und die Ethnographie den ‚exakten‘ Naturwissenschaften gegenüber. Seiner Überzeugung nach haben die ersteren immer Züge von Subjektivität, auch wenn die größten Vorsichtsmaßnahmen ergriffen werden. Um sie zu ‚präzisen Wissenschaften‘ zu machen, bedürfe es ‚objektiver Dokumente‘ wie der ‚Chronophotographien. (48)

According to Kreimeier, Regnault's vision of a scientific archive of ethnographic film came close to being realized in Germany with the establishment of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in 1919 (48). The idea of the unquestioned "objectivity" of film and photographs as a scientific, ethnographic record still influences the institute today.<sup>36</sup> The following observation by the institute's long time member Hans-Joachim Kolöß serves as an illustration:<sup>37</sup>

Der Kunstfilm will eine eigene Deutung von Wirklichkeit, er schafft einen besonderen Symbolismus. Der wissenschaftliche Film kann dagegen nur 'Reproduktion' sein; er ist Abbild der Wirklichkeit, er ist Beweismaterial, aber er stellt keine Interpretation und Deutung dar. (Engelbrecht and Ballhaus 15)

In spite of the progress in the debate over mediated representation, ethnographic film continues to be seen as directly mirroring reality. This idea underscores a deluded conviction of the camera's function as neutral and as a supplier of unbiased evidence in the aim to record, represent, and categorize other cultures.

The celebration of ethnographic spectacles in popular culture and the enthusiasm with which German anthropologists took to researching the "primitive" other in the form

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<sup>35</sup> Klaus Kreimeier. „Mechanik, Waffen und Haudegen überall. Expeditionsfilme: das bewaffnete Auge des Ethnografen.“ *Triviale Tropen. Exotische Reise- und Abenteuerfilme aus Deutschland 1919-1939*. Ed. Jörg Schöning, 1997.

<sup>36</sup> For a historical overview and critique of these, see Martin Taureg. "The Development of Standards for Scientific Film in German Ethnography." *Studies in Visual Communication*, 1983.

<sup>37</sup> This excerpt is mentioned by Beate Engelbrecht and Edmund Ballhaus in the introduction of their edited book *Der ethnographische Film: Einführung in Methoden und Praxis*, 1995.

of various African tribes has also been ascribed to Germany's having had fewer colonies than other European powers and its losing them after the First World War. Oksiloff notes:

Although Germany entered the colonial race very late in the game and had relatively few holdings compared to other western European nations, representations of the colonies became one way of securing unified German identity. The German colonies of New Guinea, South West Africa (Namibia), East Africa (Mozambique), Togo, and Cameroon provided settings for picturing an epic *Ur*-encounter with the body of the primitive Other. Ethnographers and colonialists strove to tame that body and to secure the material evidence and wealth associated with it. [...] Alongside museum display, film proved to be an important validating device of the supposedly truthful scientific glance cast upon the colonies, moving from inanimate to animate bodies as artifacts. This was of particular importance, given the fact that German colonial holdings boasted what some anthropologists considered to be living specimens of the most primitive human species. [...] After the loss of colonies at the end of World War I, the drive to picture the primitive intensified. Among narrow professional and broader popular audiences alike, the screened body of the native figured as a lost unity and provided a vanishing point for a fantasy of coherence and wholeness. (5, 6)

Apart from the idea of scientific objectivity, western Anthropology at the time, especially in Germany, was also guided by ideas of and belief in wholeness and coherence provided by ethnographic studies. This implied that cultural artifacts, ethnographic films, and other material "evidence" gathered in anthropological expeditions at the time often served as cultural metonyms that served to stand in for entire cultures.<sup>38</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there also existed strong economic connections between the financing of ethnographic expeditions through various *Vereine*,<sup>39</sup> sale of cultural artifacts to museums, as well as production of ethnographic spectacles like the *Völkerschau*, which meant that the exigencies of one field invariably fed into the disciplinary notions of another.

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<sup>38</sup> This idea of wholeness in fact persisted for long in the way ethnography was defined. See Karl Heider. *The Ethnographic Film*, 1976.

<sup>39</sup> For an insightful exploration of the unique role that these *Vereine* played in German public life, see Andrew Zimmerman. *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, 2001.

The certainty that guided these notions of scientificity, objectivity, and authenticity were increasingly influential in the German anthropological perspective of non-European cultures and resulted in theories such as the two-race theory supported by Gustave Schwalbe and Ernst Haeckel (Oksiloff 6).<sup>40</sup> Craniometry and the two-race theory gained currency with the emergence of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s. At the same time, the emphasis turned to *Volkskunde*, with its connection to the idea of a German nation, whereby the Romantic poetic nationalism of Romantics like Herder and the Grimm Brothers transformed into fascist nationalism (Naithani 18).<sup>41</sup> The collusion of German Anthropology with National Socialism, led to skepticism within the discipline towards theoretical approaches after the Second World War, and instead concerned itself largely with an emphasis on fieldwork and material empirical approaches.<sup>42</sup> Although intended as a distancing gesture from racist trends that thrived within the field, this turn resulted in a lack of theoretical self-reflection.

A few decades later, in North America, the field of Anthropology witnessed the newly emerging *Writing Culture* debates, which critiqued anthropological practices from the perspective of rhetoric. It focused on the politics of representation in Anthropology and its link with power relations and led to many innovations in ethnographic writing. In Germany, however, the scientific study of other cultures still remained largely influenced

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<sup>40</sup> Oksiloff notes that in the nineteenth century Germany saw an influence of two conflicting perspectives. One was that of evolutionary anthropology which categorized European societies as superior to “primitive” ones. The other was that of empirical materialism, which was also influential in scientific expeditions. This led to enough variations in evidence to disprove anthropometric theories like the smaller size of skulls being evidence of the inferiority of Africans, which is why scientists then turned to the two-race theory instead, so they would not have to account for conflicting evidence. Oksiloff, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Sadhana Naithani. *Folklore Theory in Postwar Germany*, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Haller, 2012.



by old unquestioned paradigms of the neutral, objective, western observer studying non-European cultures.

A politicization of the travel narrative and a deeper engagement with everyday life could already been seen in travel literature between the two World Wars (Brenner 589).<sup>43</sup> Travel writing in Germany in the decade after the Second World War saw the reemergence of the popularity of the thematic of non-European cultures. During the following decades there emerged varying trends within this genre, ranging from documentary reportage to a resurgence of literarization and subjectification of travel accounts. The backdrop to this was the socio-historical events within Germany like an increasing politicization of public discourse, radicalization of the students' movement, and growing solidarity with anti-colonial movements across the world. A large number of works, however, continued to use foreign cultures as *Projektionsfläche* (Brenner 657). This often veered between using foreign culture as a way to reject modern developments in Europe or, instead, representing it as in need of being brought into the fold of western civilization and western notions of progress (e.g Ferdinand Urbanek, Ingeborg Drewitz, Gerd Hoffmann, Wolfgang Hieber, Helge Timmerberg) (Lotz 505).<sup>44</sup> Despite variations, non-European cultures therefore largely continued to be defined through a negation or comparison with Europe – whether celebrated for their spirituality and proximity to

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<sup>43</sup> Brenner, 1990.

<sup>44</sup> Rainer Lotz. „Ansichten von Indien – Interessen und Perspektiven in einigen neueren Reiseberichten über Indien“. *Utopie – Projektion – Gegenbild. Indien in Deutschland. Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch*, 1987.

nature or derided for not conforming to western notions of progress (Cañizares-Esguerra 18).<sup>45</sup>

This brief overview of the history of travel writing in Germany shows the variations in both the form and content of travelogues, with some noticeable patterns emerging over the years. From a tendency towards mythical narratives of monsters, dangerous flora and fauna, to a fascination with the “primitive” tribes in Africa seen as a source to the “pure” origins of humanity, there later developed a “scientific objective” perspective influenced by positivist functionalist ethnographies based on material empirical evidence on the one hand, and abstract two-race theories on the other. Even though experiments with travel writings continued in the form of documentary reportage or overtly subjective narratives, the idea of Europe as a measure persisted in most of the travelogues that dealt with non-European others.

## **Section II: Concepts at stake**

In order to understand the contribution of Fichte’s and Ottinger’s works to the field of cultural representation, it is necessary to delve into how the understanding of the process of representation evolved in the twentieth century. Though the process of representation has been discussed and reflected upon since Plato, discourses in social sciences and humanities in the twentieth century saw an intense focus on interrogating the medium of representation itself. According to Stuart Hall, three main perspectives can be identified in the development of how linguistic representation has been understood: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. According to the first mimetic perspective,

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<sup>45</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra. *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World*, 2001.

language is simply seen as “reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world” (Hall 25).<sup>46</sup> The second understanding of how meaning works in representation holds that it is the speaker that imbues a sign with his/her individual meaning. The third approach is the one that has enjoyed more validity in academic discourse than the other two. According to this perspective, “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don’t *mean* – we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs” (Hall 25, emphasis in original). This approach distinguishes between the material reality and the visual or linguistic symbols used to create meaning in relation to this reality: “Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts” (Hall 25). Hall’s distinction is useful in understanding the contribution of Fichte and Ottinger to ethnographic discourse. While conventional ethnography has primarily relied on the mimetic or reflective approach, studying the reality of different cultures in order to describe and explain them, Ottinger’s and Fichte’s works critically highlight the role of language and discourse in constructing the meaning of other cultures.

The twentieth century, which witnessed an unprecedented destruction in the world wars, as well as saw an intensification of anti-imperial movements, decolonization, etc. saw some of “the West’s most confident, characteristic discourses” (Clifford 10) being

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall. “The Work of Representation”. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall, 1997.

challenged.<sup>47</sup> The traditional faith in meaning as emanating from the signified (the object being represented) was contested by an understanding that the medium of representation is not transparent, that it is not completely controlled by the intention of the writer/speaker either, and that the meaning that a representation puts forth is often a matter of cultural convention. This approach, which is indebted to Saussure's language theory, was also of considerable consequence for other disciplines. Within the disciplines of social sciences and humanities, newer theoretical approaches like post structuralism, post-colonial theory, and deconstruction also lead to a reexamining of the givens in the field of anthropology and culture studies.

The linguistic turn that the fields of Anthropology and Culture Studies underwent in the 1980s lead to a questioning of the narrative authority of the anthropologist; it also interrogated the scientific representations of alterity in western anthropological discourse which had so far asserted themselves as objective while leaving their own socio-historical embeddedness unquestioned. Foremost among these debates were studies by George E. Marcus, Dick Cushman, Clifford Geertz, and James Clifford. Instead of continuing to take the perspective of the social scientist/ethnographer for granted as transparent, neutral, and objective, these debates marked a break, in that they brought the rhetorical aspects of ethnographic studies into focus while also expanding the understanding of culture as text. The making of ethnographic texts and the politics of representation and rhetoric came under scrutiny. Written accounts were no longer seen as secondary to 'real' ethnographic work done in the field but as constitutive of how non-western cultures came to be defined by western anthropologists. Such written representations of cultures were

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<sup>47</sup> James Clifford. "Introduction: Partial Truths". *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986.

no longer seen as transparent but as using tropes of literature to construct interpretations of cultural phenomena. The debates about the constructed nature of cultural accounts and their entanglement in power relations of course did not happen in isolation. It was accompanied and enabled by a wider questioning of western discourses through philosophical and cultural theories of deconstruction, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and so on. What makes the works of Ottinger and Fichte interesting is that they prefigure many of the issues raised in these discourses. Some of the ways in which the concerns in their works overlap with the theoretical debates that followed have to do with representation, understanding culture as a construct, and challenging distinctive disciplinary (and epistemological) categories of science and poetics. Ottinger's and Fichte's concerns also bring together the issues of science and poetics by highlighting the politics behind their separation and the implications of this separation for discourses relating to the 'other.'

The focus on the constructed nature of cultural accounts also lead to an undermining of the idea of the scientific objectivity of the anthropologist. Although the separation of science and literature can be traced back to the sixteenth century, since the nineteenth century, disciplines in social sciences and humanities had been vying to establish themselves as scientific and objective. A positivist influence also strongly influenced western Anthropology, which used categorizations, classifications, and other scientific tools to study non-western cultures that often lead to essentialist analyses. In doing so, it left the assumptions of anthropologists' own socio-historical contexts uninterrogated and took its underlying values and morals to be universally valid, transparent norms, ignoring that these were the lenses through which ethnographers

looked on to the non-West. More recent debates have shown us that science is not outside of socio-historical processes but is embedded within them. Therefore, in the field of Anthropology, ethnographers, who had so far maintained their positions as those of objective bystanders, now also came under the purview of cultural analysis as their assumptions, historical and ideological location, and motivations began to be understood as factors that influenced the ways in which they constructed their analysis of other cultures. Fichte addresses this problem of the separation of science and poesis quite directly in his speech. The tools we use to construct knowledge – language, rhetoric, poetic – have to be also laid bare instead of being treated as invisible and transparent. Ottinger's interest in both documentary and fiction genres also shows a similar preoccupation with the mixing of the "objective" scientific and subjective poetic codes.

### **Section III: Strategies of Excess and Fragment**

In light of the theoretical debates outlined above, it would now be easier to see how Ottinger's and Fichte's works manifest these concerns in innovative ways. In this section, I will give an overview of the theoretical concepts I use in order to unpack the primary works I focus on. I will outline my understanding of the differing aesthetic strategies Ottinger and Fichte use in order to lay out the complexity of their engagement with issues of representation and difference, the self and other, fiction and fact, representation and reality, and so on.

#### *Aesthetic of Excess in Ulrike Ottinger's Films*

Ulrike Ottinger's works respond to these concerns about representation and knowledge production with respect to the ethnographic object through her choice of

exaggeration, inflation, and other kinds of excess. Her works, while varying in style, repeatedly use aesthetic excess in different ways. What I describe as aesthetic excess in her film is a range of forms and techniques that include exaggeration, saturation, inflation, mirroring, stretching duration, the use of the carnivalesque, eccentric, and camp styles, as well as extra/hyper-real focus on films. The specific elements of excess<sup>48</sup> can include repetitive shots, stylized costumes and mise-en-scène, overabundance of elements in a frame, interruptions (with or without plot motivations), non-diegetic sound juxtaposed with images to create new meanings and so on.

Another work that helps my reading of Ottinger's films through the notion of excess is Roland Barthes' essay "The Third Meaning". Barthes defines third meaning as the one that is based on the materiality of the film. In contrast to the third, the first meaning is denotative and informational, while the second works at the level of symbolic.<sup>49</sup> The third meaning, however, exceeds signification. According to Barthes, third meaning or "obtuse meaning", which has no signified, (he gives examples of chalky makeup, flatness of hairstyle, excessive mass of hair in some stills from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*), compels an interrogative reading (53). According to him, it opens the field of meaning infinitely and "declares its artifice but without in so doing abandoning the 'good faith' of its referent," in this case, the historical figure of the czar (Barthes 58). He further defines obtuse meaning as "discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning (as signification of the story). This dissociation has a de-naturing or, at least, a distancing effect with regard to the referent (to 'reality' as

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<sup>48</sup> These elements are mentioned by Kristin Thompson in her discussion of cinematic excess. Kristin Thompson. "The Concept of Cinematic Excess." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes. "The Third Meaning. Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills." *Image-Music-Text*. Stephen Heath, Trans., 1978.

nature, the realist instance)” (Barthes 61). But, more important to our understanding of how this connects to Ottinger’s techniques, is Barthes’ point on how third or obtuse meaning (or “accent”, as he calls its constitutive element) is “not directed towards meaning, does not theatricalize, does not even indicate an elsewhere of meaning; it outplays meaning – subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning” (Barthes 62). Seen in the context of portraying a different cultural reality, Ottinger’s films also tend to question the “practice of meaning”. Though minutely observed and very detailed, they resist any facile self-assurance of defining any culture. Her films, therefore, neither exhibit the scientific authority of an ethnographic film nor an unquestioned self-other binary common to cinematic representation.

Even though Kristin Thompson’s view proves inadequate to understand the way excess works in Ottinger’s films, it is useful to first outline it, since excess is usually understood along the lines that she mentions in her 1977 essay “Concept of Cinematic Excess”. Thompson defines excess in cinema as those elements that do not directly serve to forward narrative or present a unifying picture. She builds upon Barthes’ notion of the third meaning and Heath’s analysis of excess as those elements that have no narrative function. Stephen Heath<sup>50</sup> discusses how a film can be read in terms of a struggle between opposing forces: those that “strive to unify the work” and those aspects that are not contained by its unifying forces – the excess. Heath understands the filmic system as composed of one, the film that produces homogeneity, and two, everything outside it that goes into holding its structure but is in contradiction to it. Homogeneity, therefore, is an effect of the film and is “haunted by the material practice it represses”. The narrative “can

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen Heath. “Film and System: Terms of Analysis Part II.” *Screen*, 1975.



never contain the whole film which permanently exceeds its fictions”. Thompson finds Heath’s analysis inadequate since he doesn’t illustrate the concept well (e.g. he doesn’t provide instances of tension between materiality and narrative). She finds Barthes’ concept of third or obtuse meaning more helpful and better illustrated, though she prefers Heath’s term of excess, because the word ‘meaning’ in Barthes’ case is misleading since what is at play in this concept is actually an interruption of meaning. Thompson’s concept of cinematic excess also draws from the Russian formalists and their division of plot and story and the concept of motivation and staircase construction (or in Barthes’ words: “when something causes my reading to skid”). Unlike Barthes, she believes that excess does weaken the meaning of the structure it accompanies; the only way excess can fail to affect meaning is if the viewer fails to notice it altogether, which is a matter of training and, therefore, likely if one is primarily used to classical narrative cinema. But as soon as the viewer begins to notice style (which she defines as use of repeated techniques and which she distinguishes from excess as the latter forms no specific patterns that we could say are characteristic of the work) for its own sake or watch films that don’t provide thorough motivation, excess begins to affect the meaning of the narrative. Excess is also counter-narrative, and noticing these elements can provide a parallel reading next to the main narrative reading. Thompson talks about the need to look at the rough parts, the incomprehensible elements, those that don’t fit in seamlessly into a tight analysis, that linger longer than their narrative function would demand of them. Excess is not only counter-narrative, it is also counter-unity. Through her illustrations from *Ivan the Terrible*, Thompson emphasizes that her task as a film critic can only be that of pointing, because other means of analysis are designed for non-excessive structures. According to

Thompson, analysis implies relationships between devices, but elements of excess do not form relationships beyond that of coexistence. She uses the Russian formalist tool of motivation to make this pointing more systematic, and emphasizes how the lack of narrative, compositional, or realistic motivation can direct our attention to excess. A film is a display of a struggle in that it seeks to unify aspects and contain the diverse elements that constitute it. Motivation is the primary tool by which a work makes its own devices seem reasonable; excess begins at the point where motivation ends. There are four ways in which material of the film can exceed motivation: form, duration, devices whose overemphasis makes them redundant, and repetition. Problematic and unclear elements, props, non-diegetic or strange sounds etc. all can be instances of excess.

Thompson views excess, in a very limited way, as the material that begins where motivation ends; it is counter-narrative, non-unifying, and it is in the incomprehensible, oppositional elements that hold a film together. Ottinger's strategies, however, cannot be encapsulated by Thompson's definition of excess, as it proves quite inadequate to understand the multiple ways in which excess is employed in the former's films. In my view, excess is not the surplus material that is non-unifying in Ottinger's films, but rather the very focus of the films. As we shall see in the next chapter, Ottinger inflates our view of Mongolian culture to such an extent, that it is the unifying narrative of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (i.e. the plot of western tourists getting kidnapped, enjoying a summer festival, and returning to the Trans-Mongolian train) that appears to be peripheral to the excess in the film. Ottinger's use of excess will be discussed in detail in the chapter on Ottinger, but to give a few quick examples: the chinoiserie (anthropologist's collection) shown through slow takes in the beginning scene of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, the

quite-literal eruption of an incomprehensible scene with a shamanic ritual later on in the same film, the transformation of Orlando and the focus on historically marginalized groups in *Freak Orlando*, etc. In all these scenes, it is the surplus of rituals and objects (often seemingly unmotivated and in excess of the plot) that makes up a substantial portion of the film. We have seen Thompson pointing out that reading through excess can offer a parallel film. Were we to follow her framework, Ottinger's inversion of excess and narrative could easily be read as offering an alternative cultural reading. However, as Ottinger emphasizes excess in multiple ways in her films, Thompson's concept of cinematic excess proves inadequate for my analysis. Likewise, Bill Nichols'<sup>51</sup> concept of excess in cinema, as the noise that remains after the information, also fails to capture the crux of Ottinger's aesthetic strategy. Ottinger, in fact, collapses the distinction between "noise" and "information" in order to highlight the politics and constructedness of the distinction between the two and what is regarded as constituting knowledge or relegated as inconsequential. As viewers, we are not simply accessing a parallel narrative through excess. Instead, our gaze is directed, through excess, to questions over the very nature of storytelling, discourse formation, and any mode of representation. The strategy of excess also equips Ottinger to foreshadow culture as performance which has no authentic core.

In many ways Ottinger's films question the totality that different kinds of narratives exhibit when it comes to representing other cultures. In order to understand the techniques that Ottinger uses to interrogate the ascription of meaning to other cultures, we need to account for the ways in which Ottinger emphasizes the materiality of the film, for instance, or the especially long duration of shots, the highly stylized costumes and so

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Nichols. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 1991.

on, or in other words, the accents that exceed signification. As noted earlier, in Ottinger's works, such elements are frequent and conspicuous enough to interrupt our gaze as viewers with specific genre expectations. Ottinger uses excess in such a way that they resist subsumption to a narrative. Fichte too uses a decentering approach which mobilizes contradiction and elements that don't fit in a smooth narrative, but instead of excess, he uses fragments as one of his main aesthetic strategies.

*Aesthetic of the Fragment in Fichte's works*

Although Fichte's technique of bringing together disparate elements (snippets of conversations, newspaper headlines, telephone directory lists, etc) without smoothing them over can also be described under the rubric of pastiche, collage, ideogram or as a "method of permanent transcription",<sup>52</sup> I have chosen to discuss them here under the concept of fragment in order to focus on the building blocks that constitute what critics have also described as his palimpsestic works. The aesthetic strategies of excess and fragments may seem disparate at first, but they both contribute towards heightening the indeterminacy that marks Fichte's and Ottinger's travel writings and films, an aspect that is discussed later in this chapter.

In order to approach the use of fragments by Fichte, it is necessary to first discuss Early German Romanticism, whose articulation of a theory of the fragment radically distinguished it from previous conceptions of the fragment. Literature and criticism were both seen as co-existent in the Early German Romantics' idea of a "progressive

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<sup>52</sup> This description is from a research project on Hubert Fichte and the "Poetics of the Improbable" being conducted at Freie Universität Berlin by Joseph Vogl and Derek Linck. Project description from Research Project B9 website: <http://www.sfb626.de/en/teilprojekte/b9/index.html> Retrieved in December 2012.

Universalpoesie”<sup>53</sup>. Literature therefore produced its own theory, a critical turn that, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy<sup>54</sup>, was a vital influence on modern literature. The following example from the *Athenäums Fragmente* illustrates this aspect, as well as the radical departure that it represented from the previous views of a fragment: “Viele Werke der Alten sind Fragmente geworden. Viele Werke der Neueren sind es gleich bei der Entstehung.”<sup>55</sup> The Early German Romantics departed from the idea that a fragment was a secondary, incomplete part of a former whole, whereby the original, complete form (e.g. of a narrative or an artifact) was the privileged one.<sup>56</sup> Instead, the fragment was regarded as the embodiment of the constant becoming, always incomplete: “Die romantische Dichtart ist immernoch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, dass sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann,”<sup>57</sup> and yet independent in itself: “Ein Fragment muss gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel.”<sup>58</sup>

Along with the limitations posed by a lack of system, the Jena Romantics also acknowledged the need for one and acknowledged both the presence and lack of a system as dangerous. It is this paradox that characterizes their philosophy and conception of literature. Yet, the question remains whether their notion of a fragment ultimately also falls back under the notion of a systemic whole. Whether the idea of the whole is

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<sup>53</sup> This is another aspect where the influence of Early German Romanticism can be seen in Hubert Fichte’s works and his investment in combining science and poesis through what he called *poetische Anthropologie*.

<sup>54</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, 1988.

<sup>55</sup> Friedrich Schlegel. „Athenäums Fragmente.“ *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*, (1798) 1978. Fragment 15.

<sup>56</sup> William Tronzo in his book, *The Fragment: An Incomplete History (Issues and Debates)*, 2009 distinguishes between “received” and “created” fragments (79).

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, 1798. Fragment 91.

<sup>58</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, 1798. Fragment 99.

ultimately privileged more by them or not (given the nature of the fragments, it is difficult to delineate their philosophy since it constantly undercuts itself), their influence on German literature is undeniable, and like many others, it can also be seen in Fichte's ideas. Like them, Fichte too was invested in a mixing of genres a resistance towards totalizing narratives.

The Early German Romantics were seen as reacting against the universalizing narratives of Enlightenment. Maurice Blanchot<sup>59</sup> points out this connection between the theorizing/ self-conscious use of fragments as a genre as engendered out of the increasing invalidity or untenability of universal truths and grand narratives. It is therefore no surprise, that Jena Romantics' privileging of fragments is tied up with their resistance to the Enlightenment narrative. Given his own experience as a religious and sexual minority in National Socialist Germany, Hubert Fichte too was invested in pluralism and against universalist, totalizing tendencies, although his writings are also deeply influenced by an anti-colonial solidarity that was on the rise in the nineteen sixties.<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on fragments as an aesthetic technique is thus intricately bound up with Fichte's political investment<sup>61</sup> in plurality and multiplicity.

It has also been pointed out that this preoccupation with a fragmentary approach in Fichte's case comes from a skepticism towards the sciences as well as traditional

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<sup>59</sup> Maurice Blanchot. *The Infinite Conversation*. Susan Hanson, Trans., 1993.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Michael Lutzeler analyses this trend by focusing on a group of German authors of the time and the "postkoloniale Blick" found in their works in the introduction to *Der postkoloniale Blick: deutsche Schriftsteller berichten aus der Dritten Welt*. Ed. Paul Michael Lutzeler. 1997.

<sup>61</sup> The edited volume on Fichte, *Texte und Kontexte*, attempts to highlight the very political content of Fichte's writings that has often been ignored in the literary criticism on his works in favor of a more decontextualized analysis. *Hubert Fichte. Texte und Kontexte*. Eds. Jan-Frederik Bandel and Robert Gillett, 2008.

narrative forms<sup>62</sup>. That is why, in Fichte's works we see the reality being constructed before us<sup>63</sup>, an aspect conspicuous in Ottinger's films too. His questioning of disciplinary boundaries in favor of an approach that merges genres – science with poetics, documentary literature with avant-garde aesthetics<sup>64</sup> is again reminiscent of the Jena Romantics' notion of the genre-defying *Progressive Universalpoesie*, whose goal it was to “bind” disparate genres, but bind in a manner that meant constant interruption instead of a finished whole. Michel Chaouli sums it up aptly in his essay on Friedrich Schlegel.<sup>65</sup>

...creating a whole by means of a permanent parabasis means that the whole can last only in the space of two interruptions, indeed that the whole, in the manner of a chain of chain reactions, gets permanently combined and recombined as one reads and reads the fragments. Only in this sense can we understand a system to be a work, more precisely a work-in-progress. (147)

Apart from allowing for the possibilities of such multiple and continuous recombinations, Fichte's use of fragments also relies as heavily on interruptions. These interruptions have to do with the way we habitually understand but also with allowing for suppressed histories to be articulated in simultaneity with each other in a way that would not be possible through a linear plot or an overarching explanation. For instance, as we shall see in Chapter 3, in a section called “Synoptische Splitter” from *Die Palette*, Fichte juxtaposes fragments related to a colonial trade commodity with Sankt Pauli's inclusion in the city of Hamburg and references to his dying grandmother, who, herself a Protestant Christian, was crucial for his survival as a “Mischling ersten Grades” in National Socialist Germany. With fragmentary but closely packed references to these, Fichte

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<sup>62</sup> Torsten Teichert. „Herzschlag aussen“ *Die poetische Konstruktion des Fremden und des Eigenen im Werk von Hubert Fichte*, 1987 (40).

<sup>63</sup> Torsten Teichert. „Herzschlag aussen“, 1987 (41).

<sup>64</sup> Teichert categorizes Fichte's works as both documentary literature as well as avant-garde. Torsten Teichert. „Herzschlag aussen“, 1987.

<sup>65</sup> Michel Chaouli: “Critical Mass, Fission, Fusion. Friedrich Schlegel's Volatile System.” *Rereading Romanticism*, Ed. Martha Helfer, 2000.

collapses the experiences of biographical, geological, administrative, colonial, and industrial times. In doing so, he imbricates varied kinds of time that constitutes the lived but rarely articulated. Fragments thus manage to compress and express the complexity of the lived and inherited experience of time in a manner that the linearity of a syntax would never capture.

Although Fichte uses an aesthetics of the fragmentary, while Ottinger favors strategies of excess, both artists' ethnographic works avoid the certainty of scientific discourse associated with traditional (and even many contemporary) ethnographic treatises. Instead, they emphasize indeterminacy and incomprehensibility. This uneasy accessibility in their works is perhaps also the reason why their works remain on the margins despite continuing popularity of genres of travel literature and cinema. Neither providing formulaic or explanatory ethnographic knowledge nor clear narrative arcs, their works do not merely provide alternate readings of non-European cultures they engage with, but rather, they also resist and question any facile self-assured reading by constantly pointing to their own creation and resisting an all too easy semanticization of cultural others. This celebration of indeterminacy and the twin motivating forces of familiarizing the strange and estranging the familiar has been celebrated by other artistic movements and is in many ways even intrinsic to the notion of the art and poetics. However, Ottinger's and Fichte's works weave these notions in the context of power discourses that have traditionally marked Europe's engagement with non-European cultures, thus producing works that not only provide sharp, insightful critiques of the connections between power and knowledge-creation, self and other, but also make a cultural intervention by performing these critiques in the very form of their works.



### *Indeterminacy*

As with fragments, the concept of indeterminacy under discussion here has to be differentiated from the historically generated indeterminacy, where a reconstruction proves impossible due to a lack of sufficient information or the original context.<sup>66</sup>

Indeterminacy is to an extent part of all artistic productions irrespective of their historical time periods and has come to be understood in twentieth century literary theory as a characteristic of literature in general and therefore as a matter of degree.<sup>67</sup> This section focuses on the heightened indeterminacy as a self-reflexive aesthetic strategy that marks modern literature because this also constitutes a conspicuous characteristic of Ottinger's and Fichte's works. In looking at the theoretical discourse on indeterminacy it becomes clearer how their works extend the discussion and thereby its implications.

Similar to the theorization of the concept of the fragment, the idea of indeterminacy as a self-reflexive aesthetic strategy is ascribed by literary history to Early German Romanticism. Although not named specifically so, indeterminacy in fact was closely tied to their concept of the fragment and the idea of constant becoming (*werden*) of the *progressive Universalpoesie*, both marking a resistance to totalizing systems of thought. Theoretical works on the poetics of indeterminacy tend to distinguish between the concept of ambiguity forwarded by the New Critics in the mid twentieth century and that of indeterminacy that is ascribed to Deconstruction and gained more currency in the latter part of the century.<sup>68</sup> While ambiguity is seen as a poetic device located on the

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<sup>66</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove lists the various types of indeterminacy. Charles H. Cosgrove. "Introduction". *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations*, Ed. Charles H. Cosgrove, 2004 (6-7).

<sup>67</sup> Charles Cosgrove 2004 (5).

<sup>68</sup> Timothy Bahti. "Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture". *Comparative Literature*, 1986.

textual level and implying the presence of multiple meanings, indeterminacy is defined as the “impossibility or unjustifiability of choosing one meaning over another” (Culler 189)<sup>69</sup> and is associated with the reader and the act of interpretation. As the term has gained currency in literary criticism, it has also come to be acknowledged as a matter of degree (rather than only being associated with deconstructionism) with regard to the aesthetic strategies used to heighten the sense of indeterminacy. Wolfgang Iser’s analysis of how modern literary texts use indeterminacy could be seen as acting on the juncture between the textual and the interpretive levels. Among the strategies described under this rubric are those of linguistic ambiguity, uncertainties of form and genre, intertextual polyvalence and ambiguity, and therefore, multiple possibilities and contradictions, as well as competing interpretations.<sup>70</sup> For instance, in Chapter 2, we shall see how Ulrike Ottinger first sets up clear distinctions through two parts of the film, shot in very different styles and evoking the fictional and documentary genres. While the first part of the film is shot in highly stylized indoor sets, the second part utilizes the genre conventions of traditional documentary films with its static camera and “authentic” outdoor locations. However, Ottinger does so only in order to invite projections and destabilize these distinctions through a powerful final sequence that undermines the very representational practices she uses.

What distinguishes the play of indeterminacy in Fichte’s and Ottinger’s works, is the fact that the aim there is not merely to establishing an ultimate assertion about the indeterminacy of knowing the other (in fact, any assertion about indeterminacy would be

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<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 1982.

<sup>70</sup> Like Cosgrove 2004, Wolfgang Iser also enumerates various strategies that contribute to indeterminacy in literary texts. Wolfgang Iser. “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach”. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, 1974.

contradictory). Instead, their goal seems to be to destabilize meaning and established knowledge of the other by subverting traditional modes of representation, for instance, through apparently objective scientific description or through an orientalist discourse, in order to make one aware of the construction of the other. A good example of this would be Ottinger's decision in *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* to leave most of the part set in Mongolia untranslated. Her use of partial subtitling and partial translation of some rituals and traditions by an anthropologist character therefore takes on the posture of scientificity but this only serves to draw our attention to the inaccessibility of Mongolian characters and their everyday concerns and conversations (see Chapter 2). Rather than claim to be above these discourses, both lay out clearly their fascination with the other, with anthropology as a field, as well as the role of cultural imaginary within that, but in both their works there can be seen a refusal to smooth over the contradictions and sutures that constitute our understanding of difference.

Fichte's and Ottinger's use of indeterminacy in their works may not be an entirely uncommon strategy. But its innovative use interrogates the process of knowledge creation and its relation to power as well as the claim of scientific objectivity in representation of the other. Additionally, they do not restrict themselves to non-European cultures that have been the mainstay of ethnographic accounts. Instead, they also engage with the many others within Germany such as marginalized sexualities or underground urban subcultures.

*The Surrealist moment in Ethnography*

At a time when the *Writing Culture*<sup>71</sup> debates were still at their inception in American academia and ethnography as a field was still entrenched in the conventions of a field that was anxious to prove its scientific objectivity and show itself on par with other social sciences, Clifford's 1981 essay sought to irreverently make a connection between ethnographic activity and the "critical attitudes, dispositions usually associated with the artistic avant-garde". The link Clifford thus makes with surrealism (540)<sup>72</sup> is based on his understanding of it "an esthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions – that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious." He relates this surrealist "disposition" with what he calls the ethnographic attitude: "To see culture and its norms – beauty, truth, reality – as artificial arrangements, susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions, is crucial to an ethnographic attitude." Clifford's main argument in this essay is to show how the ethnographic attitude is present in surrealist works that defamiliarize the familiar; this he calls "ethnographic surrealism". However, it is his fleeting remarks at the end of this essay that provide a productive starting point for the questions that interest me about the three artists mentioned earlier. He mentions that, though they often remain unacknowledged, surrealist procedures are present in ethnographic works, too. The "surrealist moment in ethnography" is thus defined by him as "that moment in which the

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<sup>71</sup> This debate marked a turn in anthropology in the mid-1980s because culture came to be seen as composed of "seriously contested codes and representations." As elaborated in the eponymous book edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, 1986, *Anthropology and Ethnography as sciences were not to be seen as above cultural, historic and linguistic processes, but rather, entrenched within them.*

<sup>72</sup> When Clifford uses the word surrealism here, he means it in a broader sense than just that of the Surrealist Movement. James Clifford. "Ethnographic Surrealism" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1981.

possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity.” Clifford outlines a few characteristics to define such works, for instance, ethnography as collage, polyvocality, unintegrated data, etc., but it is my contention that the surrealist moment is more varied and productive in the works of Ottinger and Fichte. Their ethnographic focus not only pertains to non-European others but also to marginalized others within Europe, and they creatively use incongruences, contradictions, inversions, strategies of excess, fragmentation, and so on, to interrogate the dominant modes and normative discourses whose staying power derives from their naturalization of themselves. It is this surrealist procedure that interests me in the works of Fichte and Ottinger, and in the following chapters, I look at the effect that their experimental aesthetic techniques produce in combination with the ethnographic tropes they employ for internal and external others.

## Conclusion

In taking up overtly ethnographic themes in their works, even describing themselves as ethnologues in interviews, while also playing with the genre both at the level of form and content, Fichte and Ottinger seem to be reacting to a history of certainty that on the one hand, has defined ethnographic writing and travelogues about non-European cultural others, and on the other, has frequently invisibilized internal others in historiography and dominant discourses. A persistent aspect of this kind of certainty in the traditional descriptions that they question was what Johannes Fabian<sup>73</sup> calls the anthropological obsession with order and its equation of knowledge with an imposition of order on presumed chaos (766). Although Fichte’s poetic ethnographic works are based

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<sup>73</sup> Johannes Fabian discusses this in his essay "Presence and representation: The other and anthropological writing." *Critical Inquiry*, 1990.

on extensive research that he undertook during his travels, one way that he counters this imposition of order posing as knowledge is through the use of fragments. Despite the lack of an overarching uniformity, his use of fragments manages to convey multiple dimensions of the places he represents. He neither falls into an overly subjective tone for which the *Fremde* or Hamburg's subcultures are merely a projection screen for one's own problems, nor does he resort to an entirely documentary reportage style that leaves out the subject's own positions and biases. His overt subjects of interest – rituals and sexuality – may be entirely traditional so far as the non-European external others are concerned (although not so much for the internal others of Germany). But the fact that the fragments he uses are from varying sources – conversations, newspapers, interviews, God-litanies, commodity prices etc. – instead give a refreshingly complex picture of the places and groups he visits within and outside Germany without reducing them to an essentialist, unidimensional portrait which depends on binaries of the hypersexualized and the civilized, the spiritual and the rational, the underdeveloped and the developed.

Ottinger too uses different strategies to counter traditional ethnological representations and question dominant discourses. According to Fabian, the problem with ethnography's realist stance is its unwarranted presumption of being representative of the reality (Fabian 761). What Ottinger does to challenge this tradition, along with our genre expectations that have emerged as a result, is to underscore the aspect of performance. One way she does this is through her use of excess – in costumes and in sound, for instance. Another way she does so is directly through the plot – what we understand to be a very neutral objective documentary-like footage, for example, is revealed to be an elaborate staging later on in the film. The authentic thus turns out to be a performance.

This challenges notions of authenticity that usually accompany traditional ethnographic representations of non-European cultures, especially in the case of objective visual “evidences” provided by photographs and films, which were highly celebrated as scientific tools in German anthropology already from the initial stages of their development. At the same time, her emphasis on performance also interrogates claims to objectivity made by history and social sciences in general.

Tim Youngs cites a succinct, insightful summary of the depiction of history of travel writing as a genre by Dinah Roma Siantun, who identifies a familiar pattern in the historical overviews and asks a pertinent question: “a typical historical overview of travel writing is often like this: belatedly discovered, hybrid genre which had imperial origins but crosses boundaries and unsettles conventions. But the key question is: is it free of its imperial origins?”<sup>74</sup> Whether or not Ottinger’s and Fichte’s works are free of them is debatable; what is clear, however, is that they both confront these origins in their own ways and let it play out instead of avoiding it altogether.

Given the recent innovations in ethnographic writing, questions arise about the specificity of literature’s cultural intervention (and by extension, of fictional film) in comparison to ethnographies<sup>75</sup> (or in ethnographic documentary films). In her recent book, *Imaginary Ethnographies*, Gabriele Schwab takes this question as a point of departure: “Perhaps the most distinct aspect involved in literature’s writing of culture is its appeal to the psyche, the emotions, and the unconscious.”<sup>76</sup> In underscoring

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<sup>74</sup> Tim Youngs, 2013; he quotes Dinah Roma Siantun’s unpublished paper “From Colonial to Cosmopolitan Visitors: Detours in Theory of Travel” presented at National University Singapore in 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Recent innovations since the Writing Culture debate are based, for instance, on more sensitivity towards the situatedness of the ethnographer, more openness in form, etc.

<sup>76</sup> Gabriele Schwab. *Imaginary Ethnographies: Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity*, 2012.

literature's role as transformational rather than merely epistemic, she focuses specifically on experimental works and their effects.

At a more subliminal level, readers may also encounter ways of being in language that are so radically unique and unfamiliar that it appears as if one were temporarily transported into a different mode of being or had slipped into another form of life. Working via indirection and detour, these experimental texts disrupt the smooth operations of referentiality, enfolding their otherness into formal and rhetorical choices, thus also forcing readers into close encounters with literary materiality and craft [...] Where such challenges to habitus occur, the experimental system has induced a reorganization of both epistemic knowledge and structures of feeling or affect (6).

In order to understand the manner in which works by Ottinger and Fichte work as experimental systems and challenge habitus, the following two chapters focus primarily on their individual aesthetic strategies and the implications thereof. In chapter 3, I explore how Fichte pushes the boundaries of the representation of Germany's internal others and external non-European others by privileging art as an ethnographic mode. We shall see, for instance, that his incessant use of fragments generates multiple layers, heightens the production of indeterminacy, forces his readers to work out connections themselves and to not only read differently but also to perceive differently. Ottinger's films likewise disorient viewers by transporting us to a realm that is neither fictional nor documentary nor even a simple hybrid of the two but is, rather, an unfamiliar and new terrain which we simply cannot conquer with our existing tools of representation, ways of knowing, seeing and feeling. Perhaps, the question is not so much whether or not we are successful in replacing these old tools and practices with a new set of tools and production and consumption processes, but rather, whether we have begun the twin move of both feeling the urgency for such a reorganization and of doubting its very possibility. In the following chapter, we shall see Ottinger constantly subverting our current tools of



representation and epistemological strategies, invoking certain expectations and interpretations only to then unsettle them, and heightening indeterminacy in order to question the assumptions that undergird Europe's relations with both its non-European external others and its internal others.

## Chapter II

### Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* and *Freak Orlando*

In this chapter, I take two of Ulrike Ottinger's films – *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989)<sup>77</sup> and *Freak Orlando* (1981) – to discuss how, together, they highlight her engagement with the discourse about non-European external others and Europe's internal others. *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* chronicles a journey on the Trans-Siberian railroad that unexpectedly leads a group of western tourists to encounter Mongolia at close quarters. *Freak Orlando* traverses two thousand years of European history. On the surface, the two films appear to represent different thematic foci – a cultural encounter with Mongolia and a cinematic historiography of Europe. However, both films, upon closer examination reveal Ottinger's persistent interest in questions of epistemological assumptions and biases. In one she dwells upon Europe's relation with the non-Europe, especially within the traditions of travel narratives and Anthropology (as outlined in Chapter 1). In the other, the epistemological biases that are implicitly confronted have to do with Europe's internal others, that is, the marginalized and persecuted groups within its boundaries. Both types of others are marked by silencing and exclusion, yet their exclusion also defines the center that excludes them. Ottinger's emphasis in both these films seems to be an active destabilization of normative discourses by way of exposing the lack that actually exists behind the center (whether it is in terms of a sign, a totalizing discourse or political power). Her films invite projections that resemble dominant

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<sup>77</sup> The film title is subsequently mentioned in short as *Johanna*.

epistemological strategies while simultaneously or subsequently subverting these in such an unsettling manner that it forecloses any easy replacement or critique. Although the individual techniques deployed vary in each of the films, they are related in different ways to the predominant strategy of excess. In the sections that follow, I discuss how and to what effect Ottinger deploys these strategies. I do so through close-readings of some key scenes and their mise-en-scène, depiction of spaces in the film, and the analysis of the development of selected main characters.

### **Section I: Literature Review**

In their critical reception, Ulrike Ottinger's films have been approached by feminist film theorists in terms of debates surrounding psychoanalytic concepts like fetishism, masquerade, and narcissism as well as those of gender and genre (Sieglöhr 198).<sup>78</sup> A number of early articles on Ottinger published in the eighties focus on the use of myth in her films. Yet others engage with the function of masquerade and fetishism and emphasize how her films challenge patriarchal notions and create space for a lesbian feminist gaze. One of the first volumes to focus on Ottinger's films, *Gender and German Cinema* (1993)<sup>79</sup> contains essays by Ruth Perlmutter, Sabine Hake, and Miriam Hansen. Perlmutter describes Ottinger's experimental filmmaking as baroque neo-grotesque. She emphasizes its grounding in humor and parody and enumerates various strategies on the level of costume as well as intertextuality that work as a challenge to patriarchal notions of heroism and "the misogynistic groundings of genre films," (175)<sup>80</sup> while also satirizing

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<sup>78</sup> Ulrike Sieglöhr. "Women Film Makers, the Avant-Garde and the Case of Ulrike Ottinger." *The German Cinema Book*. Eds. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, Denis Göktürk, 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Sandra Frieden, Richard McCormick et al. *Gender and German Cinema. Feminist Interventions*, 1993

<sup>80</sup> Ruth Perlmutter. "German Grotesque: Two Films by Sander and Ottinger" *Gender and German Cinema*, 1993.

feminist naiveté in simply trying to “supplant men with the same sexist models” (169). Sabine Hake discusses the “homosexual sensibility” that underlies Ottinger’s films like *Madame X- An Absolute Ruler* (1977) and underscores its deconstruction of mediated images of femininity, its subversion of psychoanalytic narrative of female castration, and its presentation of “female homosexuality as an aesthetic and not only a sexual choice” (186).<sup>81</sup> The article also briefly mentions the orientalist erotic imagery of this film and that by its “appropriation of the oriental scenario” it links the exclusionary strategies of patriarchy and colonialism (184) and locates the film within a camp sensibility. Miriam Hansen describes Ottinger’s style as surrealist-aestheticist and discusses *Ticket of No Return* (1979) in the context of its renegotiation of visual pleasure and cinematic voyeurism by distancing effects like camera angles or by foregrounding the fetishistic character of costumes as a mask of femininity (198-99).<sup>82</sup> Ottinger’s films have therefore largely been discussed in the context of queer theory and variously described through their camp sensibility, surrealist experimentation, and lesbian/punk<sup>83</sup> aesthetic (190).

Since many of Ottinger’s recent films (especially in the last two decades) have been set in East Asia, scholars have now also begun to focus on the themes of ethnography and culture in her work. Although her films have contributed productively to these debates, much still remains to be explored, especially in relation to their engagement with questions related to epistemology, politics of representation, exoticism, and culture as performance. Recent scholarship is divided into those who underscore continuity or rupture between early and later phases of Ottinger’s oeuvre. These debates

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<sup>81</sup> Sabine Hake “And with Favourable Winds they Sailed Away’: Madame X and Femininity” *Gender and German Cinema*, 1993

<sup>82</sup> Miriam Hansen “Visual Pleasure, Fetishism, and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger’s *Ticket of No Return*” *Gender and German Cinema*, 1993.

<sup>83</sup> Angelia McRobbie is cited by Miriam Hansen, 1993.

notwithstanding, the concepts and themes of ethnography are not simply valid for works on the non-European external other but for the entire oeuvre, as Ottinger anthropologizes Europe itself just as much as she destabilizes narratives about the non-European other. In both her early and later films, she accomplishes this by using strategies that recall what has been exiled out of Europe and imprisoned in non-European places. This brings us to the pertinent question – why did this focus in scholarship on Ottinger’s films shift only after the location changed from Europe to Asia? This chapter is an exercise in making queries regarding the films that Ottinger sets not only in Asia but within Europe itself.

Ottinger’s 1989 film *Johanna* has been praised by critics for its experimental strategies that challenge dominant patriarchal notions. According to Cyrus Shahan, the film “mobilizes fetishism and desire” through “lesbian fetishism that detaches itself from patriarchal domination” (175). It does this by taking male perversions like fetishism and takes them “beyond the limits of their tolerance” and by deviating “from the male order” and “sequestering of the women characters, as well as technically, through the vacillating cinematic gaze” (176). Shahan sees lesbian fetishism as depicted in this film as one that avoids the phallic order through strategies of hyperperformativity, suspension, and transformation of female-female desires. Harjes and Nusser see the film *Johanna* as explicitly connected with a feminist emancipatory agenda, whereas her later film *Exil Shanghai* is interpreted by them as having a broader scope, in that it underlines the importance of subjective construction of the authenticity of historical sites (248). (It must be noted though that Ottinger explores the notion of authenticity in her later films in general, not merely in historical ones such as *Exil Shanghai*.) Other critics like Therese Grisham choose to focus on the cultural encounter between the European travelers and

the Mongolian tribe they come across. In her article, Grisham underscores the cultural confrontation that the film presents as well as Ottinger's deconstruction of the binary oppositions expected by the spectator. Like other critics (e.g. Shahan), she too highlights how the film explores the transformative power of such encounters. Most scholars tend to see the figure of the anthropologist, Lady Windermere (played by Delphine Seyrig), as the voice of authority and even as a stand-in for the filmmaker's voice. Though Grisham more insightfully notes that Lady Windermere, "embodies one way of looking at the world and telling a story" (24), she doesn't dwell much on how the film repeatedly undermines and challenges the position of the objective, "rational", impartial but "sympathetic" humanist anthropologist, and how it is used as a comment on the cultural encounter. By focusing on the figure of the anthropologist, I will try to expand on Grisham's insights about the figure she describes as "only one small corner of this *theatrum mundi*" (24). I will discuss how the film uses the role of the anthropologist not just to critique the cultural encounter, which cannot be detached from its historical context of colonialism, but also to challenge the spectator's own expectations of the genres of documentary or ethnographic films.

Julia Knight's article on this film focuses on the problems of ethnographic filmmaking, culture as construct, and parallels between rituals and cultural identity. Nora Alter also discusses Johanna and how Ottinger "directs the viewer in the spectatorial position of nomadic oscillation" (20) by moving between documentary and feature, between various homosocial experiences, as well as expanses of space and (ritual) time (21). However, an examination of the relation of European travelers towards each other in the first half of the film (and not only to the Mongolian figures they later meet), also

reveals how the issues highlighted in *Johanna* are not limited in scope but present a critique of dominant historical discourses in a way that raises pertinent questions about what is deemed as knowledge. The film challenges basic notions of scientific objectivity of anthropology, as well as the constructed hierarchical difference between the self and the other, which formed a cornerstone of colonialism and its instrumentalization of the notion of the Orient. It also makes interesting links between the cultural imaginary and the role that desire plays in the choice of the anthropological object. Tanja Nusser explores some of these aspects in her reading of Ottinger's films as transgressing not only geographic and cultural boundaries, but also binary models of self and other, woman and man, heterosexual and homosexual. She interprets travel in her films as connecting both "Erfahrung des Anderen" (experience of the other) and "Selbsterfahrung" (experience of the self).<sup>84</sup> Laurence Rickles too underscores her films' questioning of binaries. According to him, *Johanna* cannot be simply divided into part fiction and part documentary, since there are other tensions and differences constantly at work. His reading of *Johanna* emphasizes the "new realism" (Ottinger's phrase) that arises out of a juxtaposition of the fictional and documentary modes and by "fantasy that begins to take over, to overflow the margins of its containment", and Ottinger's use of inflationary performance which leads the surreal to break through what we hold as familiar. In my exploration of Ottinger's use of excess I draw from this reading to focus more closely on the role that indeterminacy plays in interrupting our habitual modes of perception.

*Freak Orlando*, although one of the more-well known films of Ottinger, has not received as much attention as *Johanna* has in academic scholarship. The articles and

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<sup>84</sup> Tanja Nusser. *Von und zu anderen Ufern. Ulrike Ottingers filmische Reiseerzählungen*, 2002.

reviews that have discussed the film tend to focus on the power of images in the film and the use of Stationen-Kino that lends itself to both a dynamic narrative as well as static tableaux. Others have discussed the film in terms of its attention to the collective fantasies and dreams usually banished to silence. Uta Berg-Ganschow briefly refers to the historical silences that the film addresses while also highlighting the figure of Orlando, which combines multiple mythical and fantastical elements while deliberately resisting psychological depth.<sup>85</sup> The role of iconic actors has also been very important for the reception of the film. Katharina Sykora focuses on the role of *Orlando* played by Magdalena Montezuma and how she personifies the narration in the film. Sykora sees her strength in the ability to embody two oppositions: the persistence and cool distance of an icon as well as a figure that radically transforms in the course of the five episodes.<sup>86</sup>

Among those who have tended to focus on the film's powerful imagery, Frieda Grafe, for instance, discusses the "excessive pictoriality" of *Freak Orlando* but in the context of sexuality creating its own forms to express its relationship to law and order.<sup>87</sup> Unlike other readings, however, she is also attentive to the documentary aspect of the film. She emphasizes how a number of seemingly fantastical and inventive images are based on ones that have historically existed. Laurence Rickels builds upon her reading and provides insightful observations about the way different epochs depicted in the film "contaminate" each other while simultaneously connecting to the "contemporary commodification of representation" (83).<sup>88</sup> In my discussion of the film, I attempt to take their interpretations further by close reading a few scenes to unpack the film's references

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<sup>85</sup> Uta Berg-Ganschow. "Tausend Tode unterwegs." *Die Zeit*, 13.11.1981 Nr. 47.

<sup>86</sup> Katharina Sykora. "Kino-Ikon. Magdalena Montezuma oder die Verschmelzung von Leinwand und Maske." *Frauen und Film*, 2000.

<sup>87</sup> Frieda Grafe. „Mythen auf dem Mist des Alltags.“ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 7/8, 1981

<sup>88</sup> Laurence Rickels. *Ulrike Ottinger. Autobiography of Art Cinema*.



to broader historical and contemporary political realities as well as the role of the body, the spectacle, and of contemporary myths within them.

## **Section II: *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* (1989)**

*Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* is a film about a group of European and American women, who, while travelling on the Trans-Siberian railway, are kidnapped and later invited as guests to their summer festival by a Mongolian princess Ulan Iga (played by Xu Re Huar) and her nomadic tribe of women. The first half of the film is colorful, humorous, emphasizes aesthetic excess and takes place on a train, which is a highly stylized studio set. The camera takes us into the posh interiors of the dining carriage and the individual compartments that are inhabited by the tourists. Among them, we are introduced to Lady Windermere (Delphine Seyrig), a French cultural anthropologist residing in London; Frau Müller Vohwinkel (Irm Hermann), a high-school teacher; Fanny Ziegfeld (Gillian Scalici), an American Broadway musical star; and Giovanna, a young Italian backpacker, who is part of a love triangle with Lady Windermere and Princess Ulan Iga. Giovanna is the title character, discussed in great detail in the scholarship on this film, mainly focusing on the relationship between her, Lady Windermere, and the Mongolian princess Ulan Iga. It is through Giovanna’s entry that we are briefly introduced to the third-class compartments filled with locals. When we first see her, Giovanna is attired in the unmistakable clothes of a backpacker. Initially distanced from the local travelers in the train, Giovanna then (in the Taiga) does not so much as ‘go native’ as come to epitomize—both by the love triangle she creates as well as by adopting a motley of identifiably western and Mongolian attire—the hybrid.

The latter half begins as the band of Mongolian tribeswomen stop the train, kidnap the European and American tourists, take them along to their yurts (mobile huts), and later invite them to stay on as their guests to participate in the annual summer festivities. This latter part is almost entirely set in the Mongolian steppes. It has a deliberate, slow pace which is starkly different from the first half. With a static camera, long shots, and slow pans, Ottinger records various rituals of the summer festival being observed by the Mongolian tribe. In this second part, which is much longer in length, the film thus begins to resemble an ethnographic film, overtly using the traditional documentary mode. The film, however, takes a full circle and ends on the train. This time, the Mongolian women accompany their western guests back to the train tracks and halt the train for the second time by heaping sand on the tracks to help the tourists carry on with their journeys. The last scene, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, proves crucial for the film's questioning of notions of realism and authenticity as well as its own portrayal of Mongolia.

### **1. The Tourist and the Anthropologist: Frau Müller-Vohwinkel and Lady Windermere**

Frau Müller-Vohwinkel<sup>89</sup> is a nervous, uptight tourist played by Irm Hermann, who evokes similarly repressed characters that she often portrayed in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films. She travels on the Trans-Siberian train and represents on the surface an entirely different approach to the non-European other than her co-traveler Lady Windermere. Described as "Oberstudienrätin" (secondary school teacher) in the intertitle card, she presents a reifying approach, which relies on guidebooks that domesticate and

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<sup>89</sup> Henceforth referred to as Vohwinkel in this chapter.

essentialize the other. She is introduced in the second scene of the film, right after the initial sequence with Lady Windermere. Lady Windermere, on the other hand, studies Mongolian folktales and epics, knows the local languages, is open to new experiences, and stands for a more nuanced approach. The mise-en-scene already differentiates Vohwinkel's space from the luxurious chinoiserie that characterizes Lady Windermere. Instead of the Chinese paintings and artifacts adorning the former's compartment, Vohwinkel's train compartment has a more twentieth century functional style, and is lined with black and white photographs of railroads and their construction. The camera tracks her from the side as she paces up and down eagerly reading her *Russland Baedeker*.<sup>90</sup> Her compartment has one window, but we only see it briefly from the side as snowflakes fall on it. Vohwinkel is seen engaging not so much with the vastness of the Tundra or, unlike Lady Windermere in the opening sequence, with ideas about cultural contacts, as with the railroad itself. It is this that impresses her—the railroad itself, which she sees as evidence of “man's” technological superiority, innovativeness, and organizational capacities in the taming of the wilderness through which they're travelling on the Trans-Siberian train. By depicting Vohwinkel's faith in the railroad, Ottinger also introduces us to another of her concerns—the relationship between colonialism and fascism. At various historical moments, the railroad has stood in for ideas regarding the civilizing of colonized natives, the efficiency of National Socialism, or the post-colonial/nationalist appropriation and retention of infrastructures engendered by colonialism. What Ottinger achieves by deliberately collapsing a series of periods in modern European history in her juxtaposition of a visibly nineteenth century amateur anthropologist and a

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<sup>90</sup> *Russia Baedeker*. The Baedekers, as they were popularly known, were a series of tourist guidebooks published by the German publishing house owned by Karl Baedeker (1801-1859). They were especially popular between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

mid-twentieth century middle-class schoolteacher (as also an Italian backpacker), she likewise achieves through a mishmash of the very different ways in which the railroad simultaneously epitomizes different ideas, moments and places. So that one can never be certain if the train we are seeing is the triumph of the National Socialist will, the triumph of colonial civilizing mission in Inner Asia, or the native appropriation and retention of colonial infrastructure.

While reading aloud her Baedeker's description of the railroad construction, Vohwinkel looks directly at the camera (the only time she does so in the film) and proudly asserts, "Ein Triumph des menschlichen Willens!" Soon after, she is shown visibly impressed upon learning that the person directing the project was a "deutscher, väterlicherseits". Her words can be seen as signaling towards Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 propaganda film *Triumph des Willens*, a film that became famous for its glorifying representation of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. With the use of an extensive film crew, 30 cameras and 9 aerial photographers (expansive for those days), Riefenstahl is said to have orchestrated and thus created the event instead of merely having recorded it, as she later claimed in her interviews. Riefenstahl, however, went out of her way to hide the artificiality of this elaborate cinematic event, at times even disguising her camera crew as rally supporters or athletes. In her 1975 essay "Fascinating Fascism",<sup>91</sup> Susan Sontag remarks about this film: "In *Triumph of Will*, the document (the image) is no longer simply the record of reality; 'reality' has been constructed to serve the image." It is this idea that the film seems to emphasize in this scene. As Vohwinkel voices relief that her Baedeker doesn't let her get lost (in the strange vastness

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<sup>91</sup> Sontag, Susan (February 6, 1975). "Fascinating Fascism". *The New York Review of Books*. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/feb/06/fascinating-fascism/?pagination=false>

of the Tundra), the camera tracks back and we see her in profile through a medium long shot. It is at this point that the spectator is distanced from her and we get to directly see the view from her compartment window for the first time. Outside her window, we see trees sliding past. But these are trees that are a part of conspicuously artificial, painted scenery that we have already encountered in the first scene of the film.

Apart from the constructedness of the reality outside Vohwinkel's train compartment, the scene brings to light another important aspect, which has to do with her repeated use of the term "wissenswertes". After reading about the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad, she voices relief that she has her Baedeker guide to orient her by revealing all that is "wissenswert" (literally, worthy of knowing) that lies behind the green landscape. In this case, therefore, two objects – the train and the book – act as the interface between man and nature, and thereby partake in the forging of the worthy epistemological object. But this is the tragedy of the German anti-humanist faith in artefacts and nature – that the train and the book already not only constitute nature but also make the human subject. Objects are a treacherous ground on which to erect any boundaries, and later on we shall see how Ottinger reminds us that objects, too, can lie, that they are not the repository of 'fact'.<sup>92</sup>

Enlightenment as a discourse has been critiqued for being grounded in notions of conquest and power differentials, one of the most prominent ones being about man and nature, where man appears at the center in his quest for the domination of nature. This power differential, in its upholding of hierarchical binaries, also gets mapped onto other relations like man-woman, rational-emotional, self-other, nature-culture, and so on.

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<sup>92</sup> For more on this theme and its history, see Andrew Zimmerman. *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, 2001.

Vohwinkel's character, ironically depicted, succinctly and evocatively exposes these implications of the Enlightenment discourse. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer critique Bacon's idea of knowledge obtained through systematic enquiry into nature as one that would "establish man as the master of nature"(1). "For Bacon as for Luther, 'knowledge that tendeth but to satisfaction, is but as a courtesan, which is for pleasure, and not for fruit or generation.' Its concern is not 'satisfaction, which men call truth', but 'operation', the effective procedure" (2). In her admiration of technological mastery of nature and the high value she holds for knowledge that is instrumental, Vohwinkel seems to embody this description of Enlightenment rationality. This aspect is illustrated again the second time that we hear Vohwinkel using the term "wissenswert" in an argument with the adventure traveler Giovanna during a conversation in Lady Windermere's compartment. Giovanna, the backpacker, who travels without guidebooks and hotel bookings, provides a contrast to Vohwinkel's fixed itinerary, replete with Baedeker and bookings. It is while denouncing Giovanna's manner of travelling and defending her own that Vohwinkel again asserts the necessity of knowing what is worthy of knowing while travelling. In this instance, what has led her to defend her Baedeker is the useful information it has provided her by describing the exact symbolism of a woman's colorful attire in the local Spring festival that is being discussed by the European passengers. In this case, what we see defined here as knowledge turns out to be an imposition of known, familiar categories on that which is unfamiliar. As concluded later in this section, Vohwinkel shares this epistemological strategy with many of anthropology's presumptions. Vohwinkel's flaunting of this knowledgeable fact irritates Giovanna. By consistently portraying Vohwinkel's character as fixed in her preconceived

notions, the film aligns us with Giovanna's criticism of Vohwinkel's dependence on the guidebook.

Whether it is the history of the brave and energetic men who organized the railroad construction in the area (whom Vohwinkel admiringly describes as *tüchtig*, *tatkräftig*), or the symbolism of the Spring festival, for Vohwinkel, what is considered "wissenswert" repeatedly turns out to be that which familiarizes the foreign to make it less disorienting and daunting. What is deemed worthy of knowing is the new or the unfamiliar. Instead, "wissenswert" turns out to be a re-imposition, and thereby validation, of that which is already familiar by projecting it onto the unfamiliar. Though brief, the scene with Vohwinkel reading about technological and organizational innovation behind the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad is richer still in the relation that it establishes between a discourse that privileges what it considers "wissenswert", its view of the relationship between humans and nature, and its approach towards the cultural other. In short, in its ironic presentation of a character like Vohwinkel's (her admiration of masculine bravado, technological mastery over nature, racial and nationalist superiority of Germany, instrumental rationality, and her resistance towards the unfamiliar) this scene critiques the links between Enlightenment rationality, patriarchy, and colonialism.

The film especially critiques the discourse of the "wissenswert" by presenting Vohwinkel as a caricature, a character ill-equipped to deal with a cultural otherness that does not easily fit within its preconceived categories. In several scenes in the film, this caricature works by alienating Vohwinkel's statements, which would have otherwise sounded commonplace, by filtering them through the starkly unfamiliar context of

nomadic life in Mongolian steppes. The unfamiliarity of this context is heightened because of its contrast with the stylized indoor spaces of the first part of the film. Differing notions of time are also brought into play here. As Vohwinkel and her western co-passengers are kidnapped by the Mongolian princess and her tribe, they have to disembark the train and join the caravan of camels and horses that slowly winds its way through mountain passes and sacred trees to open steppes, where, after the recital of an ancient epic (in which the princess receives her kingdom back from the man who stole it), the tribe decides to camp for the summer. Along with the stark change of *mise-en-scene* to a natural outdoor setting, the camera movements also suddenly shift from fluid medium shots and frequent close-ups to static long distance shots with slow pans. It is through such shots that we see the traditionally clad nomads (in brightly colored flowing robes) slowly unpack their caravans, build their yurts (mobile homes), and set up camp for the summer after a shaman has performed a purification ritual for the area. In the midst of these new surroundings, the western tourists have already begun to appear extremely out of place with their attire (this part is discussed in detail later in this chapter), but what is further defamiliarized through this strategy is the notion of linear time that the train had so far symbolized.<sup>93</sup> The epic time ritualized by the recitation of the Mongolian epic, the slowness of pace, as well as the cyclical time emphasized by the seasonal nature of summer camp are introduced to the viewers as soon as the second part begins. In this context, therefore, when the tourists are invited by the Princess Ulan Iga to be her guests and participate in the summer festival and when Vohwinkel, sitting with the others in the grass, with only the vast green of the steppes stretching out till the horizon,

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<sup>93</sup> The train has often figured as catalyst in a linear notion of history (it ushers in progress, modernity, efficiency, development and so on), but it must also be noted that the Western characters in the train are all from different moments in modern European/ U.S. history, which makes the scene more complex.



expresses her bafflement and worry over her train connections and hotel bookings, it is her notion of time that seems starkly out of place and ridiculous.

Ottinger defamiliarizes, and thus manages to caricature, this commonplace notion of time (as ruled by clocks and mechanical schedules) by uprooting it from its usual context (of a routine on a train or a city, for instance) and re-embedding it in an entirely different one. The by and large concealment in the pastoral and seemingly timeless Mongolian *mise-en-scene* of any technological artefact that would even hint at a contact with modern western civilization further alienates the notion of time associated with instrumental rationality and with industrialization, the time of train schedules and hotel bookings. The other tourists, unlike Vohwinkel, eagerly accept the princess' invitation in the hope of an authentic cultural adventure, thus exhibiting openness to new experiences on the one hand, and colonial exoticism on the other. They too are eventually mocked by the end of the film. It must be noted that the film does not indulge in the orientalist conceit of depicting the "ahistorical" non-European other, ruled by cyclical and mythical notions of time, although it fully invites these projections from the viewer by carefully providing a *mise-en-scene* that would be very conducive to them. It does so, however, only to entirely dismantle and expose these projections in a masterful final scene, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Vohwinkel's transformation in the film – from a western tourist primarily obsessed with her guide book and planned travel bookings on the train, to becoming the disciple of a local shaman and ultimately joining a monastic order in Mongolia – has been one of the more discussed aspects in scholarship on the film. The development of Vohwinkel's character, however, seems to highlight a continuation between her two sides

rather than a transformation resulting in substantial difference. On the surface, Vohwinkel's character does appear to undergo a transformation towards the end of the film. Upon closer inspection, however, Ottinger seems to be hinting at a connection between Vohwinkel's two sides represented in the film: on the one hand, her admiration of technological mastery over nature, of Germanic lineages, of instrumental rationality and its success in a totalizing understanding of the other, and on the one hand, her attraction to the "irrational" and mysterious phenomena she encounters in Mongolia, which ultimately lead to her "going native" and joining a Buddhist monastic order.

Through Vohwinkel's figure, Ottinger thus seems to be engaging with two approaches to understanding National Socialism: one that highlights its relation to Enlightenment rationality and the other that relates it to mystical and occult traditions and underscored its "irrational" aspects. The former is well-known through Adorno and Horkheimer's work on the dialectic of Enlightenment, where they analyze National Socialism not as an aberration but connected to the fundamental characteristics of Enlightenment and Western civilization. The latter approach links National Socialism's "Blut und Boden" ideology with its privileging of the religion of nature as well as with the influence of the occult and mysticism on it.<sup>94</sup> Although scholarship on this film emphasizes the aspect of transformation in its analysis of individual figures, Vohwinkel's figure seems to highlight a continuation between her two sides rather than a substantial difference. On the surface, Vohwinkel's character appears to undergo a transformation

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<sup>94</sup> In an overview of National Socialist and fascist ideologies, Lyman Sargent emphasizes that, although rarely explicitly stated, irrationalism is one of the dominant characteristics in almost all fascist and national socialist writings. Lyman Sargent: *Contemporary Political Ideologies: A Comparative Analysis*, 2008. See also: Robert G. Lee, Sabine Wilke: "Forest as *Volk*: *Ewiger Wald* and Religion of Nature in the Third Reich." *Journal of Social and Ecological Boundaries*, 2005 and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke: *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology*, 1993.

towards the end of the film. Upon closer inspection, however, Ottinger seems to be hinting at a connection between Vohwinkel's admiration of instrumental reason and its success in mastery over nature, and between her attraction to the mystical traditions of the East, which lead to her "going native" and joining a Buddhist monastery.

To see this connection, it is useful to describe the choices her character makes in the second part of the film. One of the few scenes that focuses on Vohwinkel alone shows her wandering in the steppes. She pauses to pick a wild flower growing in the grass and appreciatively exclaims to herself, "So viele Edelweiss!" before safely putting it away in a little metal box, in which she is presumably collecting other samples. The scene cuts to a sequence about a hunting expedition that the princess leads, which is followed by a frantic search for Vohwinkel once it comes to light that she is missing. Vohwinkel, however, is shown walking on with her box of Edelweiss. There is a jump cut to Vohwinkel entering a dark cave to see a lama sitting behind a shrine. Upon seeing her, the lama motions her to accept an offering and leads her to a wall with currency and coins stuck to it as offerings. The Lama urges Vohwinkel to offer money there and when she does so, is urged to give more. After this, we see a close-up of a hand pushing a part of the cave wall. The scene then abruptly cuts to an external low angle long shot where the grassy ground bursts open to reveal the shaman chanting behind two mounds, on each of which stands a figure – one in a white dress with a laurel wreath, the other in a black costume with a skeleton painted on it. A closer shot reveals the two figures to be the lama and Vohwinkel. Lady Windermere later explains this phenomenon (the ground bursting open) as a natural one that occurs in spring, but is unable to account for its appearance in summer. In a later scene, which has to do with various performances and rituals that form

a part of the summer festival, Vohwinkel stands next to the lama and declares: “Meine Lampe der Weisheit behellt das Dunkel der Dummheit.” This is one of the turning points in the film’s development of Vohwinkel’s character, since it is finally only revealed in a voiceover in the last scene that Vohwinkel never left Mongolia, unlike the rest of her European travel companions, and instead chose to stay behind and join a monastic order. In the light of this, the reference to light and darkness juxtaposed with the cave scene takes on a particular reading. Plato’s cave allegory invariably comes to mind here.<sup>95</sup> If one reads this scene in the light of that, then Vohwinkel’s seminal transformative experience in the cave and the “miracle” she perceives right after (both of which are implied to be behind her decision to stay back in Mongolia and join the monastic order) are simply her projections, which she assumes to be reality. This also connects to her delight in finding the familiar Edelweiss in the midst of the steppes that initially unnerved her. These ciphers – whether of the Edelweiss that alludes to notions of purity but also to the projection of the familiar onto the unfamiliar, or the railway line and the Baedeker guide book which connote a domestication of the tundra that allows it to become traversable for tourists – at the same time also underscore the two seemingly exclusive but inherently connected aspects of National Socialist imagery too. On the one hand, the railway line with which Vohwinkel is fascinated connects to the idea of instrumental rationality and technological progress as the means to a mastery of the foreign. On the other hand, Vohwinkel’s character is shown as invested in a notion of a pastoral

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<sup>95</sup> The possible connotations of the cave scene in the context of Mongolian Lamaism, however, still remain to be worked out in scholarship on the film, including in this work. This is perhaps due to lack of in-depth knowledge about Mongolian religious traditions and languages.

authenticity, which was also characteristic of National socialist ideology.<sup>96</sup> Whereas Vohwinkel is shown as negotiating the unfamiliar by imposing familiarizing categories, Giovanna relies on chance and individual experience. Lady Windermere, on the other hand, is portrayed as someone involved in careful study of languages, rituals, and performances of the local cultures.

I will now focus on the figure of the anthropologist and the issues that are raised through her portrayal in the film. The figure of the anthropologist also connects to other vital questions that the film raises – the relation of western anthropology to non-Western cultural others, the epistemological function of travel, the creation of the ethnographic object, culture as performance, and so on. The importance of the figure of the anthropologist in *Johanna* can already be judged from Ottinger's own description. During a retrospective of her films in New York in 1990, she described herself as an ethnologue.<sup>97</sup> Ottinger's films from the 1990s onward have often been described as ethnographic in nature, distinguishing them from her early fantasist films.<sup>98</sup> Although this distinction does not hold up to closer scrutiny,<sup>99</sup> *Johanna* is popularly seen as a bridge between her early and later cinematic interests. It is also her only film that has an anthropologist as a character; yet, this has not been adequately explored in scholarship dealing with the film. Some critics, such as Rickels, tend to read the figure

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<sup>96</sup> Jeffrey Herf analyzes, through his concept of reactionary modernism, National Socialism's investment in the notion of purity related to the idea of pastoral authenticity (*völkisch*) on the one hand, and on the other hand, its seemingly contradictory reliance in mobilizing technology. Jeffrey Herf: *Reactionary Modernism*, 1984. For a discussion on National Socialism and mysticism, see: Robert Pois: *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*. London and Sydney: Groom Helm, 1986.

<sup>97</sup> Roy Grundmann: "Minorities and the Majority. An Interview with Ulrike Ottinger." In: *Cineaste*. 1991; 18 (3): 40-41

<sup>98</sup> Roy Grundmann, among many other scholars, makes this distinction.

<sup>99</sup> Ottinger too has emphasized in interviews that her early films are also ethnographic in nature, just as her later films continue to have an interest in the performative and the fantastical.

autobiographically by seeing Lady Windermere, the anthropologist, as embodying the director's voice and exemplifying her model of a sensitive cultural interaction. However, even when Lady Windermere is discussed as an important character of the film, the irony with which Ottinger imbues her portrayal of the anthropologist in the field and its implications tend to be ignored or underemphasized.

The primacy of the anthropologist's character in *Johanna* can already be judged by the fact that she figures prominently in the film's opening and closing sequences, both of which take place on a train. It is worth taking a closer look at how she is first introduced. The film opens with a painted scenery in motion, followed by a close-up shot of Lady Windermere gazing at this scenery through the window of the chinoiserie in her luxurious train compartment. As she ruminates the vast green void of the Tundra in a voiceover in French, the frames that enable her to view the reality outside this chinoiserie are revealed as containing representations. A tear in the set and the painted scenery outside her train window further reveals what is supposed to represent the Tundra as a construct.<sup>100</sup> Further to the right, we now see a close-up of Chinese paintings hanging above a mantelpiece with instruments of writing (a notebook and an inkpot) placed on it. The central painting shows a couple under a tree in which the female figure is shown reading a scroll.<sup>101</sup> The camera now pans back up to reveal more objects that adorn the chinoiserie, this time, Chinese blue pottery, as Lady Windermere's voiceover here refers to the "myth of the green void". After a cabinet with Buddha sculptures and a mannequin

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<sup>100</sup> This painted scenery is the same as the one which is visible outside Vohwinkel's window. This seems to imply that the two discourses (of the guidebook-following tourist and the knowledgeable anthropologist) are both connected in the way they pre-construct this *Fremde* (the foreign).

<sup>101</sup> Although I do not pursue it here, it would be useful to explore Ottinger's understanding of image and text and how representation differs in either case. In this moment, for instance, we have an intersection of painting, writing, cinematic image, diegetic narration in French, and subtitled text in English.

wearing traditional costume, a tracking shot eventually reveals an electric light next to a (European) painting of the Madonna and her child while she speaks of attempts to place “a sign on the void”. The Chinese paintings that we see around the room through a tracking shot are copies and show a figure standing in the middle of an intricately landscaped garden; as the camera focuses on them the first time, Lady Windermere’s voiceover talks of the “slumbering wilderness” of the Tundra. The camera then tracks further to the right to show us a series of windows, at the end of which we see Lady Windermere again, this time with more distance, since it is through a medium long shot. It is only then that we come to see that the paintings we have encountered through close-ups so far are actually a series of blinds covering the windows. The only window where the blind is pulled up, the only “open” window, is the one at which Lady Windermere sits contemplating the foreign landscape which is itself a painting. An inter-title card then introduces her as Lady Windermere, a private scientist and ethnologist residing in London.<sup>102</sup>

Already in this first scene, the film evokes a number of anthropological issues that consistently appear later. Lady Windermere’s stylish attire and luxurious compartment locate her as upper class. In fact, Ottinger’s description of her, in an interview, recalls the beginnings of anthropology as she defines Lady Windermere as a nineteenth century private scientist. The *mise-en-scene* of the *chinoiserie* establishes Lady Windermere’s interest in and association with non-European cultural artefacts, while her writing instruments underscore her character as an observer and recorder. In this regard, Lady Windermere evokes aspects of early anthropologists and their primary obsession with

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<sup>102</sup> The German intertitle describes her as “Privatgelehrte und Ethnologin.”

collecting and recording non-European cultures, and the relation between colonial power and the Western cultural imaginaries which often defined what unquestioningly passed as ethnographic “knowledge” about these cultures – all of which the film goes on to question or critique. As with Ottinger’s other films, *Johanna* achieves this by engaging its viewers on multiple levels and not merely through the visual. Ottinger’s technique invites us to take the emphasis away from the visual as the most superior way of knowing anything. This is often achieved through the collage technique favored by the filmmaker, wherein non-diegetic sound, instead of emphasizing the visual, complicates or questions it. In this way, there is invariably something leftover, an excess, which can neither be subsumed under the visual nor within a broader plot trajectory. In the scene described above, there are several moments where this happens. For instance, as Lady Windermere’s voiceover speaks with romantic nostalgia about the attempts of the first European travelers to place a sign over the void of the vast Tundra, the panning camera shows a picture of Madonna and infant Jesus and an electric light next to it. In the midst of the East Asian artefacts that the camera had so far been exclusively revealing, the focus on these two objects and the their ironic juxtaposition with the voiceover, works as a critique of both the religious and civilizational sense of superiority that has informed colonial cultural contact historically. After all, both the notion of Christian superiority over heathen beliefs as well as the notion of technological progress energizing an indolent population was deployed in domesticating and colonizing the foreign. Yet, it is equally possible that it is the window frames, with their grid-like structure and resemblances to a perspectivist’s rule, which form the sign over the void, a reminder that



colonialism relied on cadastral surveys, grids, cartography, and other kinds of visual representations and practices in order to ‘know’ and to tame a space.

Moreover, Lady Windermere’s characterization as a nineteenth century private scientist and the setting of the first part of the film entirely on a train<sup>103</sup> moving through the painted Tundra only works to further emphasize the relation between the colonial engagement with the cultural others and the linear notion of progress that informed the western notion of time. Another example of the excess created by juxtaposing sound and image in this first scene from the film is the moment when Lady Windermere describes the “slumbering void” of the Tundra. Instead of an image of vast, empty steppes, the camera rests upon one of the paintings of an immaculately cultivated garden. In this case, the camera also creates repetition instead of mere contradiction, since both the spoken word and the painted image refer to a reality outside of the train. Apart from challenging the notion of the void, this scene and, in fact, the entire first sequence emphasizes how the cultural other – in this context, whether framed as wild and empty or as civilized and cultivated – figures primarily as an aesthetic representation or a collection of artefacts disconnected from its larger context. This scene, and the repetitive elements in it, however, also point towards Derrida’s notions of bricolage, play, and supplementarity, which will be discussed a little later in this chapter.

Given the connection between nineteenth and early twentieth century German ethnographic practices, financial transactions and dependence upon museum collections,

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<sup>103</sup> In an interview, Ottinger mentions the action on the train, as opposed to that in the open steppes, as an important distinction between the two parts of the film – the one showing western linear time, the other engaging with Mongolian cyclical time. How far the film maintains this distinction of linear and cyclical time as describing Europe and non-Europe (in itself a problematic binary) is dealt with later on this chapter. For more on the broader theme, see Johannes Fabian: *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 1983.

as well as their connections with popular ethnographic spectacles in the form of Völkerschau in Germany (described in Chapter 1), it is especially remarkable how Ottinger manages to both present and critique these discourses with such economy here. It is not just the non-European other, however, that exists as an aesthetic representation. One of the critiques of traditional anthropology has been the alleged objectivity of the ethnographer, whereby subjective, contradictory, uncertain, and ambiguous aspects of ethnographic work were suppressed in order to enable the rational and scientific posturing of the ethnographer. Ottinger challenges the discourse of scientific certainty that informed such narratives by introducing indeterminacy on multiple levels, including in the figure of the anthropologist. For instance, by choosing to call the anthropologist Lady Windermere, (the name of a character from Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*), Ottinger hints towards the anthropologist herself as an aesthetic construct. The choice of this name, however, is not restricted to simply emphasizing constructionism in relation to the ethnographer's gaze. As Ottinger mentions in an interview, she prefers to defamiliarize the familiar while also presenting cultural complexities that resist easy appropriation.<sup>104</sup> It would also be helpful here to read Ottinger's films (particularly this one) in terms of Derrida's concept of the bricolage, since the names of some of the main protagonists (Lady Windermere, Johanna) themselves are examples of this strategy.

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<sup>104</sup> Ottinger elaborates on her choice of the title of this film in an interview with Patricia Wiedenhöft: "Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia is the name of a legend which the film makes audible and visible in various ways. I like to begin with great, emotionally-charged names in order to bring the seemingly familiar into new and surprising contexts. Usually, it isn't the things that are completely and utterly foreign, but rather those with which we seem to have some connection, that can unleash an incredible sense of strangeness when suddenly transported to another context. Hence also the name's mixture of languages, which hints at the multi-lingualism of cultures and resists easy appropriation."

In his 1966 essay,<sup>105</sup> Derrida discusses the notions of bricolage, play, and supplementarity. Beginning with the “event” that recognizes the center as a construct and thus displaces it, he goes on to show that it does not necessarily escape the structure it critiques and uses the example of ethnology:

Ethnology – like any science – comes about within the element of discourse. And it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them. Consequently, whether he wants to or not – and this does not depend on a decision on his part – the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them. (282)

The center can thus limit “freeplay” while the absence of this center or origin, can permit the movement of “freeplay”, which Derrida equates with the notion of supplementarity.

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. The field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite... instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (289)

The lack of a center is thus “supplemented” by a series of substitutions that in themselves are supplements. Connected to this is the concept of bricolage which he describes (in the context of Levi-Strauss’ description of it) as the method that:

[...] uses ‘the means at hand’, that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth. (285)

Therefore, bricolage, instead of dealing instrumentally with stable systems of meaning, uses that which is already there in a radical play of associations and adaptations that resist

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<sup>105</sup> Jacques Derrida: "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*, 1978.

easy assimilation. Derrida emphasizes that, in a sense, all discourse is bricolage even if it pretends not to be, and he reveals this, for instance, through his critique of the concept of the “engineer” that Levi-Strauss simplistically sets up in opposition to that of the *bricoleur*. Read in this way, Ottinger’s film too seems to be self-consciously involved in a radical play with mythologies, fantasies, dreams, stories, and cultural elements. One can observe this in the protagonists’ names, which displace and resonate names of other well-known figures (Lady Windermere, Jeanne d’Arc) while resisting neat reductions to a specific symbolism, meaning, or perspective. This is also evident in the chinoiserie scene, which juxtaposes Lady Windermere’s ruminations of the “slumbering void” of the Tundra with paintings of gardens and a scroll of a forest. In each of these, a supplement is self-consciously and conspicuously positioned to cover the lack of a center only to be displaced by another supplement. This supplement, as the excess that covers the lack, exists in a constantly shifting network of bricolage that resists easy appropriation into closed systems – whether related to binaries of civilization and nature, modern and primitive, fiction and documentary, or even the colonial and the postcolonial. This is perhaps also the reason why this film has sometimes been controversial among postcolonial critics, some of whom have accused Ottinger’s film of colluding with primitivism and employing suspect distinctions, for instance, by equating historical time to western civilization and representing the non-European other as ahistorical, by showing western tourists as distinct individuals and Mongolians as a group, and so on.<sup>106</sup> On the surface such criticisms seem justified. And yet, as we have seen earlier, Ottinger’s strategies in the film are more complex. The self-conscious, radical play and artistic

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<sup>106</sup> See: Shanta Rao: “Ethno-Documentary Discourse and Cultural Otherness” in the edited volume *Other Germanies: Questioning Identity in Women's Literature and Art*, 1997. Also, Katrin Sieg: *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*, 2002.

liberties she takes in the film not only engage with binaries related to historical primitivism but also with the tropes common to postcolonial critique.

Through the figure of the anthropologist, the film also focuses on ethnographic method. Apart from the camera revealing the constructedness of the object of Lady Windermere's ruminations (the painted backdrop of a verdant tundra) as well as the film medium's own artifice, there is another aspect that the first scene highlights. The anthropologist is introduced not in the context of the "field", not in the midst of a living cultural backdrop, but instead is within a collection of artefacts, a chinoiserie filled with vases, paintings, and masks. The introductory scene not only challenges her notion of authenticity but also raises questions about the creation of an ethnographic object of knowledge detached from the rest of its context, an artificial whole.

In her later interactions with fellow passengers, we come to know Lady Windermere as a collector of folktales and a recorder of oral performances. She describes her intention to stop at various places in Inner and Outer Mongolia and Sinkiang to witness summer festivals and performances and her interest in recording some local variants of the Geser Khan epos. Even during the first half of the film that takes place on the train, she is shown as attentive and engaged with the locals she encounters – whether it is in the third class compartment where she ventures out and meets Giovanna, or in listening to what the local woman selling rare berries tells her about their use. Compared to the other women travelers, Lady Windermere comes across as extremely well informed about the cultures of the regions their train traverses. But even as the film depicts her as more nuanced in her approach, it simultaneously hints towards the limitations of this approach, as is evident in the introductory scene. On the surface, her epistemological method

neither depends on travel guides nor solely on one's own individual experience, but rather, in paying attention to narratives and descriptions offered by her ethnographic subjects. Yet, when one delves deeper into what she pays attention to, and her role as collector of local epics, it raises larger questions about her own construction of the anthropological object. The fact that Lady Windermere prefers to study ancient epics and myths and the fact that she chooses to travel from the safe distance of a first class compartment surrounded by collected culture artefacts of the chinoiserie comments on a traditional bias in anthropology. James Clifford describes this pattern in his essay "On Collecting Art and Culture"<sup>107</sup>: "The collection contains what 'deserves' to be kept, remembered, and treasured. Artefacts and customs are saved out of time. Anthropological culture collectors have typically gathered what seems 'traditional' – what by definition is opposed to modernity" (60). This idea of collection as uprooting "out of time" is underscored by Lady Windermere's interest in the Geser Khan epic, one of the most famous epics of Mongolia, with a vibrant performance tradition. Based on a twelfth/fourteenth century legendary figure, it is the celebration of Geser, a boy who grew up in difficult circumstances but overcame them with a series of heroic feats to be crowned the leader of the kingdom of Ling. The epic is not confined to Mongolia and has been popular for centuries in Tibet, from which the Mongolian version is said to have been derived in the seventeenth century, as well as in regions ranging from Ladakh to Turkey. Though Geser's iconography reveals Central Asian features, this oral narrative has thrived for centuries across Asia, continuously transforming, without being written down (the first version being a Chinese woodblock in 1761).<sup>108</sup> The epics were

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<sup>107</sup> Clifford: "On Collecting Art and Culture" in: *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 1993.

<sup>108</sup> For more on the Geser tradition, see Walter Heissig: *The Religions of Mongolia*, 1980. (Here: p.99.)

traditionally performed by memory and with liberal additions and changes by the individual bard.<sup>109</sup> In fact, one of the ways that a bard specialized in the performance of the epic, apart from memorizing verses passed on by a mentor, was the bard's ability to receive and enrich the epic through dreams and hallucinations.<sup>110</sup> The result has been a thriving, constantly growing, syncretic tradition, with innumerable styles of performances and over a million verses. However, the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century, apart from engendering European scholarly works and recordings, also witnessed concerted efforts by the Chinese government to publish all the popular versions available. Though, on the one hand, this has safeguarded many of the versions from disappearing, on the other hand, it has also fixed them and thus made them immutable. When Clifford discusses the notion of collection, he stresses that the practices of gathering, owning, classifying, etc. are not exclusive to the West.<sup>111</sup>

All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self. But the notion that this gathering involves the accumulation of possessions, the idea that identity is a kind of wealth of objects, knowledge, memories, experience, is surely not universal. [...] elsewhere, these activities need not be associated with accumulation (rather than redistribution) or with preservation (rather than natural and historical decay). (60)

Traditional performances of the Gesar Khan epic seem to be influenced by the latter pattern that Clifford describes (of redistribution), although, given the popularity and ever changing versions of this epic, one would need to speak of historical transformation rather than decay. Therefore, it is interesting that Ottinger chose this particular epic as the ethnographic object of study of the Lady Windermere character. Apart from giving the

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<sup>109</sup> For more on this, see the short documentary titled "Gesar Epic Tradition" available through the UNESCO Archives Multimedia Website. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00204>.

<sup>110</sup> "Gesar Epic Tradition." <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00204>

<sup>111</sup> Clifford (67).

character credibility as an anthropologist,<sup>112</sup> the choice of this epic also questions Ottinger's own anthropological intervention of recording on camera and thus fixing an oral narrative that is constantly changing.<sup>113</sup>

There is a scene from the latter part of the film that also underscores this point about the constantly changing traditions that can be better approached through the concept of bricolage than by seeing them as pure manifestations of a culture. The scene occurs as a fleeting moment during the performance of this epic, which takes place as part of the summer festival in the Mongolian steppes. After kidnapping the western tourists, Princess Ulan Iga invites them to celebrate this festival with her tribe of nomadic women and offers them the hospitality of her yurts. The festival has many performances and rituals, with shamanic, Buddhist and folk influences. In one particular scene during these sequences, a Mongolian woman asks Vohwinkel for the tableware she carries with her. Vohwinkel obliges by gifting the woman her set of spoon, fork and a knife, but this fleeting scene remains insignificant till about twenty minutes later into the film, when this tableware unexpectedly crops up again. In this latter scene, the European tourists are shown joining the summer festival revelry as they dance together playfully with the shaman and other locals. At this point, one of the Mongolian women enters the scene dancing and laughing; she holds Vohwinkel's gift but the metal tableware is now tied together like a bouquet which she playfully presents to the shaman. The shaman accepts the tableware and it soon hangs around his neck like a pendant, dangling from the string

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<sup>112</sup> It must be noted that a considerable amount of scholarly work on this epic has been done by German researchers. This, along with Ottinger's own childhood fascination with Mongolia, as described by her in interviews, would have also played a role in her choosing this epic.

<sup>113</sup> This issue has also been widely discussed in scholarship related to the collection of German Volkslieder by the Grimm Brothers. Folksongs were also traditionally not written down, did not have fixed versions, and their different prevalent versions reflected their socio-cultural embeddedness often containing critiques referring to different time periods and political powers.



with which it has been tied together. This short scene with the cutlery not only underscores Derrida's understanding of all discourse as bricolage, but also connects to the differing approaches to gathering and collecting that Clifford discusses.<sup>114</sup> The Mongolian woman and the shaman are enamored by this western cultural artefact and acquire it, but it is not treated as standing in for the western culture they have encountered in the form of tourists. Instead, this object is playfully assimilated by them into their own cultural rituals. The easy playful absorption of a foreign artifact into their own rituals also hints at the syncretic, constantly changing traditions (of the Geser Khan epic, for instance) that Lady Windermere attempts to record, capture and, as a consequence, confine. This scene works well in revealing how the cultural "authenticity" that Lady Windermere is after, is itself a performance that is constantly transforming, and therefore defying any epistemological certainty that can classify it as authoritative knowledge. Regarded from this perspective, the epics that Lady Windermere records and collects, are not definitive authentic versions, but rather, ways of selectively constructing the reality of a different culture. In this sense, she can be seen as representing not a radical alternative to the character represented by Vohwinkel, but rather a continuum to it. Both Vohwinkel and Lady Windermere ponder over the history of the region through which they are travelling. The latter appears to do so in a more nuanced way than Vohwinkel's complete reliance on her Russia Baedeker. The depiction of Lady Windermere's character is less of a caricature than of Vohwinkel's, who is shown in a

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<sup>114</sup> Clifford relates the tradition of collecting to the formation of Western subjectivity. "Some sort of 'gathering' around the self and the group – the assemblage of a material 'world', the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not 'other' – is probably universal. The individualistic accumulation of Melanesian 'big men' is not possessive in Machpherson's sense, for in Melanesia one accumulates not to hold objects as private goods but to give them away, to redistribute. In the West, however, collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity." (60)

few comical scenes. Upon a closer look, the film also seems to challenge the epistemological certainty she prescribes to her research. In the end, however, it is not the connoisseur of Mongolian culture, Lady Windermere, who stays back in the Taiga but Vohwinkel. The last sequence in fact overturns the film and is in many ways the crux of the challenges that the film poses to notions of authenticity, as well as East-West primitive-progress binaries, including the seemingly benign ones that describe the East as closer to nature.

## **2. The Train and the Taiga**

The previous section has focused upon two seemingly different but ultimately related approaches to the non-European cultural other through the figures of Vohwinkel and Lady Windermere as the tourist and the scholar. Ottinger's critique of both these approaches, however, goes hand in hand with her blurring of the very boundaries that uphold the notions of the authentic, the real, and the exotic. For instance, in the first part of the film, the camera is mobile, deft, and offers access to more intimate spaces through close-ups, medium shots, or medium long shots (which invariably also contain close-ups through an interplay of mirrored images).<sup>115</sup> As it introduces us to a multicultural pastiche of western passengers on the train, this part is marked by aesthetic excess, extreme stylization and a bricolage of various forms of storytelling: folktales, Broadway songs, operettas, epics, etc. In this respect, Ottinger emphasizes, exposes, and playfully uses the radically mediated and constructed nature of any possible approach to cultural alterity.

Through subtitles, moving cameras, close-up shots, and dialogue that provides insight about their varying interests in the journey (for instance, the anthropologist's

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<sup>115</sup> Some interpreters of the film have pointed out that this film gives us access not only to the perspective of an individual but also to multiple points of view that are revealed through mirrors and reflections.

passion for collecting versions of epics, the Broadway singer's boredom, the high-school teacher's nervous uptightness, etc.), the first part of the film familiarizes the audience with the European characters. Given the range of characters we are presented, it is noticeable that in this part of the film – in stark contrast to the latter part – it is not only different locations and cultural milieus that are compressed together but also different time periods (Ottinger emphasizes this in an interview). But once it has established this familiarity, the plot of the film transposes these characters in the midst of a vast, natural, seemingly ahistoric and timeless milieu of the nomadic tribe in the Mongolian steppes. The mise-en-scene suddenly changes from close-up interior shots to exterior long shots in the steppes, as the spectator is now placed in the position of a participant-observer anthropologist. As we leave the interior spaces of the train and are introduced to the Mongolian princess dressed in traditional finery along with her band of tribal nomads, the latter are presented in stark contrast to the European characters we have become familiarized with in the first half.

Though the Mongolian women at first seem strongly reminiscent of the exotic images from ethnographies and coffee table books, the film quickly works to unsettle expectations related to the genre. It does so at two levels. On the one hand, the use of slower editing, stationary cameras, long takes, painstakingly slow and repetitive unfolding of rituals artfully manages to bring out the mundane in the exotic. The open landscape, elaborate rituals, and colorfully dressed nomadic figures that first came across as exotic in the encounter with their western hostages now take on a more mundane aura as we become familiar with the monotony of the repetitive sequences. On the other hand, however, as we get used to the landscape of the steppes and the nomadic tribe that

inhabits it along with their camels, horses and yaks, the western characters, now in a minority, start to appear increasingly out of place and exotic. Ottinger achieves this effect especially through exaggerated and stylized costumes. The Kalinka sisters, for instance, appear in rhinestone cat-eye sunglasses and shimmery black lamé dresses, while Lady Windermere's attire changes to safari wear, and Giovanna begins to don traditional Mongolian headgear and vest over her T-shirt and jeans. Even though the characters seemed to stem from differing time periods, the carefully set mise-en-scene on the train introduced each character in a related setting (a chinoiserie, a modern train compartment, etc.) thereby making their differing attire (evening gowns, jeans, etc.) seem harmonious and familiar. In the Taiga, however, the cultural markers symbolizing various time periods disappear and only the vast green steppes remain as a backdrop for these figures, thus evoking the desired effect as the same characters now begin to look affected and out of place in this new context. Therefore, by transposing the European figures from their familiar setting as tourists on a train, the film manages to defamiliarize them even as the exotic-looking nomads begin to seem more commonplace and mundane in going about their everyday rituals.

There is also a deliberate connection between the objective documentary mode of the latter part of this film and the seemingly ahistorical depiction of Mongolian culture contained in it. Johannes Fabian, in his book *Time and the Other*<sup>116</sup> draws a connection between the scientific objectivity of Anthropology as a discipline and the systematic temporal distancing that defined its relation to the non-Western cultures that served as its epistemological object. Fabian calls it the “denial of coevalness”, by which he means “a

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<sup>116</sup> Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object*, 1983 (Emphasis Fabian's). To explain his choice of the term “coevalness”, Fabian refers to the German word “*Gleichzeitigkeit*”, which has connotations of simultaneity as well as of contemporaneity.

*persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse”* (31). One of the characteristics of historical primitivism, therefore, was its exclusion of non-European others from the notion of linear historical time with which Western civilization defined itself. In the film too, there is a conspicuous move from the linear time of the train (which tellingly moves from the West to the East) to the cyclical time of the Mongolian steppes.<sup>117</sup> On the whole, we see almost no sign that the local cultures depicted in the film belong to a specific time period or the other. Despite the fact that Ottinger has described in interviews the numerous administrative obstacles and negotiations with Chinese authorities that were necessary to be able to shoot the film in Mongolia, we see no sign of this historical situatedness. That this too is a deliberate strategy to invite our projections upon the pristine Mongolian landscape is evident from a few objects that stand out from the rest of the mise-en-scene.

Already, in the opening sequences, Ottinger alludes to the co-existence – indeed, the co-constitution – of the social and the technological, subjects and objects, people and things. Later on in the film, she offers us instances where certain objects either fleet through the landscape in ghost-like fashion (here, a motorbike carrying a Mongolian family; there, a pair of sunglasses on one of the Mongolian lamas who attend the summer festival), or else, make their own presence felt as an irreducible afterthought, as another type of excess (the lever in the cave). In either case, Ottinger successfully destabilizes the received wisdom and lineages of German anthropology, which in much of the nineteenth century, concentrated on material artefacts and on a ‘natural people’ unsullied by culture or history. If, as Andrew Zimmerman argues, nineteenth century German anthropology

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<sup>117</sup> This is also how Ottinger has described the difference in the two parts in various interviews.

chose these two as its focus to sharpen its anti-humanist stance,<sup>118</sup> then Ottinger's films appear to call our attention to the doomed nature of this project by constantly blurring a series of boundaries—those set up between material artefacts and the producers and consumers of the artefacts; between natural people and culture people; between nature and culture. These objects, such as the odd sunglasses and the motorbike, serve to deliberately interrupt the seemingly pristine landscape, which in the film acts as a cipher for the idealized version of traditional ethnographies that treat the ethnographic object as enclosed in a fixed timeless state. Although fleetingly shown, these are the only objects that provide any reference to a contemporary twentieth century time period. Their momentariness both enables our projections of a “timeless” space while also simultaneously interrupting them by pointing that this timeless space is actually embedded within larger socio-political and economic power structures and historical processes such as colonialism.

However, for a more critical reading of the film, it is imperative that the two parts are regarded in the context of the last scene, and ignoring its import has led to many interpreters of the film missing the radical play at work here. The last scene is crucial in redefining the two parts that come before and makes it quite clear that Ottinger is, in fact, critiquing this temporal distancing that has traditionally created the anthropological object.<sup>119</sup> To better understand the implications of the final sequence, we need to gather a quick overview of one of the main differences in the two parts. Both parts of the film use excess in relation to the time depicted. In the first part, we are presented a historical

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<sup>118</sup> Zimmerman, 2001.

<sup>119</sup> At the same time, Ottinger also seems to be playing with postcolonial readings themselves, which have rightly pointed out these processes, while themselves becoming new ciphers or theoretical clichés.

pastiche of Western characters from various time periods and cultures – from a Victorian private scientist to a twentieth century backpacker. In order to heighten the contrast, Western historicity is thus exaggerated, while at the same time making it difficult for it to be identified as “real” because of the stylized manner in which it is presented. A different kind of strategy of excess is used for the second part, where time is extended (instead of collapsed) and which is quite deliberately set apart by presenting a seemingly homogenous culture apparently existing out of historical time. A deliberate use of slow camera movements and pace of the film marks this part, along with its extended duration, which is almost twice the length of the first part. Moreover, the almost exclusive use of natural landscapes as mise-en-scene to portray a Mongolian culture that is exaggeratedly traditional is meant to heighten the stereotype that Ottinger challenges through the last scene. The final scene on the train does just that when it reveals the entire latter half to be a playful performance by a contemporary Mongolian residing in Paris. Along with highlighting the constructedness of the primitive cyclical time, it also questions the idea of authenticity by revealing the summer festivities as an elaborate performance undertaken by a contemporary non-European other residing in the West but eager to relive old nomadic traditions.

The film challenges the stereotype of the primitive cyclical time by contrasting the tired certainty of a cliché with heightened indeterminacy that emphasizes unknowing as well as the role of our cultural imaginaries in our engagement with the other.

Wolfgang Iser has discussed the importance of indeterminacy<sup>120</sup> in the reception of literary works and the way in which the unwritten part of a work involves the reader's

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<sup>120</sup> “*Unbestimmtheit*” is the German term that Iser uses in his book *Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, 1971.

imagination into filling informational gaps, thus creating the work along with the author.

He, therefore, associates the written part of a text with knowledge and the silences with the reader's imagination.

[...] we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be abl

e to use our imagination. (283)<sup>121</sup>

In Ottinger's films, too, indeterminacy plays a crucial role, but the manner in which she employs it does not merely lead the spectator to transcend it by filling in the informational gaps. Instead, the indeterminacy that is created in the film is unresolvable in a way that forces the spectator to acknowledge the presence of one's cultural imaginary and reveal its role in the staging of the other. In the film, we see the tension between knowledge and imagination through the almost complete lack of translations for the part that takes place in Mongolia. We are provided some translations through Lady Windermere's ethnographic knowledge, in the form of her explanations (or attempts at them) to her fellow Western travelers, as well as through a few rare subtitles of portions of the performances.<sup>122</sup> This selective subtitling and translation keeps us guessing on what is going on in the everyday conversations. What is important is the filmmaker's choice to subtitle some portions, let the ethnographer act as translator in some others, and leave yet others entirely untranslated. However, most of the second part, which is full of rituals, songs, chants, performances, and conversations in local dialects, is left entirely

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<sup>121</sup> Wolfgang Iser: *The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach*. "The Implied Reader", 1974.

<sup>122</sup> Given the circumstances of the far-flung regions of Outer Mongolia in which Ottinger has filmed this portion of the film, (often without access to even electricity, let alone access to cinema halls, and political censorship), it can perhaps be safely assumed here that the majority of the target audience of the film is western and not Mongolian, who may understand many of the local dialects presented and therefore would not need subtitles or translations.



unexplained and untranslated. The few portions that are subtitled (or translated by Lady Windermere for her companions) are extremely telling and serve as a comment on the texts that traditional anthropology tends to use metonymically for the culture it is studying. Therefore, when a local lama points to and names each of the clay figurines (mostly of animals) that he has displayed in front of him for a later ritual, the subtitles suddenly emerge to reveal the obvious animal names in English. At other points, it is portions of epics and folktales that are subtitled (as they are being performed in the summer festival), since such texts were also privileged and treated as worthy ethnographic objects by western anthropologists in a way in which everyday conversations were not. In the film, it is the conversations between the Mongolians that are entirely left untranslated (unless they are a part of a cultural misunderstanding or a symbolic ritual, in which case Lady Windermere acts as the mediator). Ottinger's refusal to translate most of the dialogues in the second part of the film creates a deliberate tension between the known and the unknown. By forcing viewers to use their imagination to fill the gaps, the film also highlights how the non-European other is semanticized and attempts to counter the discourse of scientific certainty that underpins western anthropology dealing with non-western cultures. In this way, the written and the unwritten, the expressed and the inexpressible do not merely supplement each other, but, instead, build a tension between knowledge and (cultural) imagination that highlight the way in which they function.

The incomprehensibility that is engendered through the lack of translations and subtitles also stands in stark contrast to the stunning and lucid visuals we are presented in the second part of this film, which depicts the vast green landscape of the steppes,

colorfully and traditionally attired local people, as well as their many syncretic rituals and performances which combine influences of Buddhism, Shamanism, and Lamaism. Fabian makes an important point about the primacy of the visual, which is pertinent in understanding Ottinger's use of sound in the latter part of this film. He defines visualism as a tendency, whereby "the ability to 'visualize' a culture or society almost becomes synonymous for understanding it" (106). According to him, this bias towards the visual was inherited by Anthropology from rationalist thought, and "...the object of anthropology could not have gained scientific status until and unless it underwent a double visual fixation, as perceptual image and as illustration of a kind of knowledge" (121). Observation was thus regarded as validating knowledge and it is the traditional link between the visual and knowledge that this film challenges through the lack of translation, as well as through non-diegetic sound. In the latter part of the film, many of the scenes depicting local rituals, their conversations, or simply their movements, are often accompanied by sounds or dialogues that do not match the visuals. Along with the fact that these are left untranslated, the frequent presence of non-diegetic sound also challenges the visual appropriation of the camera and its historical relation to knowledge of the other. The second part, therefore, deliberately mobilizes our genre expectations (e.g. of traditional documentaries about non-European religions and rituals) in order to invert them by heightening indeterminacy.

### **3. The End of the Journey**

In an interview with Patricia Wiedenhöft, Ottinger remarks that her film is the *staging* of the encounter with the other ("die Inszenierung der Begegnung mit dem

Fremden”).<sup>123</sup> This staging is highlighted in the last scene of the film quite strongly. As with the beginning, the end of the film also takes place in a train carriage. After the summer festivities, the Mongolian princess and her companions escort the European women on horses and camels and lead them back to the train tracks, where once again the train is stopped by heaping sand on the tracks. Giovanna chooses to stay back with the princess, and we see both of them bid farewell to the other tourists (except for Vohwinkel, who is absent in the scene). The train slowly pulls away and a receding tracking shot shows the locals waving goodbye. After a brief interlude where the Kalinka sisters are shown entertaining people in the dining car of the Trans-Mongolian train, the scene cuts to another luxurious train compartment in the same train. We see Lady Windermere thanking a woman in a chic western dress for her typical Mongolian hospitality by letting her share the train compartment. Soon after, they are also joined by Giovanna, who races her horse to catch up with the train and succeeds in boarding it. As Lady Windermere begins to introduce Giovanna to their host by referring to her as Princess, the rest of her words are overshadowed by the whistle of the train as it enters a dark tunnel. However, since the Mongol princess on the train is played by the same actress (Xu Re Huar), it is clear that she is none other than Princess Ulan Iga. As she converses with Lady Windermere about the mutual fascination of their two cultures, she reveals that she resides in Paris but returns to the steppes every summer to perform the summer festival and relive the illusion of a free nomadic life.<sup>124</sup> With this little twist, the

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<sup>123</sup> Ulrike Ottinger in interview with Patricia Wiedenhöft.

<sup>124</sup> In fact, although the Tscham festival rituals shown in the film appear realistic, Ottinger has often emphasized in interviews that she had organized the festival instead of recording one already being performed, since such performances were already rare. In doing so, she also mentioned her own interest in recording this disappearing tradition, which she also critically reflects upon through the character of Lady Windermere and her interest in collecting and recording.

entire documentary part of the film is thus revealed to be an elaborate construction. Given the genre expectations related to the style used in the latter half, the invariable connotations of authenticity and objectivity are also called into question. What we have encountered as an objective introduction to the authentic nomadic Mongolian culture has in fact been a performance put forth by expatriate “natives”, with western tourists as spectators. And so, on the one hand, we are forced to become aware of our own role in the construction of the authentic and the exotic. On the other hand, the film also negates the very idea of a center, instead underscoring the displacement of one cipher by another.

The focus on the circulation of ciphers, however, does not result in a blindness towards the very real political and economic relations that play a role in this circulation. This aspect is highlighted amply in the final moments of the film, which ends with a voiceover epilogue. The epilogue narrates the fate of the western characters after their return from Mongolia and reveals Ottinger’s wit and sense of play that informs the rest of the film, too. At the same time, it also underscores the circulation of the other as a cultural commodity. The voiceover informs us, for instance, that Lady Windermere achieves scholarly fame with her book “*7x77 Observations on the Secret History of the Mongols*”; Fanny Ziegfeld stars in a popular Broadway musical called “*Transmongolia*”; Vohwinkel joins a monastic order in Kumbum; and Giovanna becomes the head waitress in the Mongol princess’ Parisian restaurant called “*Le Gobi*”. In the form of scholarship, theater play, and local cuisine, these anecdotes, on the one hand, reveal a playful and creative appropriation of their cultural experiences by the travelers. However, given the strong sense of irony that underlies this part, through these conclusions, Ottinger also stresses the stark instrumentalization of the non-European other as an exchange

commodity within a broader economic context, an aspect that has invariably accompanied western cultural interest in various time periods. The visitors thus manage to find economic or spiritual use of their journey, as does the Mongolian princess, through which Ottinger also highlights the instrumentalization of authenticity by the elite within the colonized other. Ulrike Ottinger's film *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* is thus a film that plays with the dualities of the western traveler and the exotic locale, the anthropologist and the natives, tourists and nomads, the civilized and the nomadic. By conspicuously and playfully engaging with these dualities, the film at the same time calls attention to itself.

### **Section III: *Freak Orlando* (1981)**

Ottinger's 1981 film *Freak Orlando* also engages with groups that do not conform to the normative, but in this case it focuses on Europe's internal others. The film is described as a world theater in five acts.<sup>125</sup> If *Johanna* is a journey across space, this film presents a trip through time, traversing two centuries to present the history of Europe. With Magdalena Montezuma playing the role of a constantly transforming Orlando, the film presents scenes from antiquity, medieval age, Spanish Inquisition, circus shows, and shopping centers, finally ending in an entertainment show called the annual festival of ugliness. The film is wildly inventive in its costumes and in the use of urban and industrial mise-en-scene to stage scenes from past eras. In terms of the characters, we are presented on screen a veritable carnival of "freaks" normally relegated to caricature, stereotypes, or silence in cinema, and existing in the margins of society.

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<sup>125</sup> This description is from the director's website: [ulrikeottinger.com/freakorlando](http://ulrikeottinger.com/freakorlando) Retrieved in September 2012.

A typical use of excess in Ottinger's films is already evident in the titles and names of characters, which often evoke popular figures but whose portrayal exceeds the original story. As already seen in the case of *Johanna*, Ottinger likes to choose names and titles that are culturally loaded. However, instead of basing her films more or less faithfully on the original literary characters or historical figures (Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere, Jean d'Arc, or Woolf's Orlando, for instance), she opens out these associations without reducing them to similarities with the original. According to her, although *Freak Orlando* is a homage to Virginia Woolf, it does not have much to do with the latter's 1928 novel *Orlando*. The one aspect she does admit is common to both is its central figure's ability to transform and wander through history (41).<sup>126</sup> Orlando's name and multiple transformations keep the reference to Woolf's character in play. But at the same time, Orlando's character exceeds the original that it cites. As Mary Russo points out, "Woolf's novel, in fact, supports a view that transvestitism and transsexuality are more or less the same: Orlando need only choose from a closet that is always full and the sexual plot will follow (Russo 96)."<sup>127</sup> In Ottinger's film, however, we are presented a constantly transforming figure that retains aspects from the previous figures (the fact that Magdalena Montezuma plays all the characters lends them that consistency), but which at the same time exceed previous figures and transcend the binary of male/female. In the film's five main episodes, Orlando appears as Orlando Zyklopa, Orlando Orlanda, Orlando Capricha, and Herr Orlando and transforms from a female goddess to a woman with a beard, to another who recognizes herself in a representation, and finally into Herr Orlando. In the part of the film, we encounter Frau Orlando as an entertainment show

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<sup>126</sup> Interview with Reiner Frey. „Unterwegs mit Ketzern und Freaks.“ *Filmfaust*, 1981.

<sup>127</sup> Mary J. Russo. *The Female Grotesque*, 1995.

host, before she puts on a cloak again to leave from the same gates of Freak City through which she entered in the first scene.

### 1. Freaks and Bare Life

Although the figure of Orlando connects the episodes dealing with different historical stages, the first half of the film title points to equally important protagonists. Through five episodes, we are presented figures usually relegated to spectacles of “freak shows” or banished from normative versions of history – lepers, dwarves, prisoners, homosexuals, patients, circus troupes, and so on. By placing non-normative bodies in the center, bodies usually relegated to spectacles or invisibilization (and showing them as a frequent target of violence), *Freak Orlando* highlights the body as a site of power. It can, therefore, also be read as an engagement with Foucault’s concept of biopolitics as well as with Agamben’s notion of “bare life”. Foucault analyzes the beginning of biopolitics in the modern era when the “object and target of power”<sup>128</sup> in modern society shifted from territory to the human body, and which increasingly saw it as a target of repression and disciplining. This disciplining through various institutions and mechanisms (like the medical discourse) sought to classify humans into normative categories (like heterosexuality) which were codified through a strict set of practices and rules. The human body thus became a part of the machinations of State power.<sup>129</sup> Giorgio Agamben extends Foucault’s ideas by looking at the intersection of Foucault’s “study of *political techniques* (such as the science of the police) with which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center” and “the examination of the *technologies of the self* by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to

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<sup>128</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*, (136)

<sup>129</sup> Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality*. Vol 1.

bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power” (5).<sup>130</sup> Agamben focuses on an aspect that unites them both: the production of the biopolitical body as the very nucleus of sovereign power in Western politics. He describes this “inclusion of bare life in the political realm” as not only the original activity of sovereign power but as a *concealed* act (6).<sup>131</sup> It is this concealment that is inverted and highlighted through Ottinger’s choice of figures that she uses to enact two thousand years of European history. This is evident, for instance, in the first episode which takes place in a shopping mall. The smooth functioning and regularity of this space is underscored in the scene through regular announcements about special sales, busy customers milling about from one floor to another, repetitive elevator music, and so on. The customers hurry along like “docile bodies” (in the Foucauldian sense) with their plastic bags full of consumer goods, visiting a plastic booth where Orlando Zyklopa and her seven dwarf shoemakers stand making and altering shoes and stamping them with a special seal. Their contrast to the crowd of customers around them is heightened by Zyklopa’s giant stature (enhanced by low angle medium close-ups), her three eyed appearance (she wears a tall hat with a third eye painted on it), and the dwarves clad in work-clothes who assist her. Later on in the same scene (which will be examined more in detail in the following sections), it is the giant and the dwarves which are chased out of the mall. This brings into focus the body as the target of power, thus highlighting the erasure of the body which is not “docile”, which cannot be disciplined and therefore must

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<sup>130</sup> Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roaze, 1998.

<sup>131</sup> Agamben bases his notion of bare life partly on his interpretation of Greek political philosophy, which distinguishes between *zoé* (“simple fact of living common to all living beings”) and *bios* (“form or way of living proper to an individual or a group”). He also uses the figure of *homo sacer* from Roman law, to define bare life as that of one, “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben, p.1, 8).



be banished, invisibilized or exterminated. In another scene from the third episode of the film (also discussed in the following sections), a series of prisoners is led by a band of marching men clad in black leather, which evokes the gay subculture of leathermen as well as National Socialist uniforms. The enchained prisoners – which include dwarves, people with disabilities, homosexual couples, an Amazon, and so on – are led by the marching men into a stadium with the five Olympic rings clearly visible on it. The third episode ends with the “freaks” disappearing into one of the dark passages in the Olympic stadium, and thus the film presents this history through “freak” bodies that were precisely the ones targeted by National Socialist death camps. In its focus on excess – in the sense of the unwanted and the superfluous – this film can therefore be read as a comment on how exclusion forms the very core of dominant historical narratives and sovereign power.

The focus on historically marginalized and excluded figures in *Freak Orlando*, however, does not translate into a simplistic, romanticized view of the oppressed and the marginalized as inherently incapable of violence. Ottinger, in fact, resists such a portrayal by deliberately using the same actors to play varying roles (of both perpetrators and victims) throughout the film and disrupting an all too easy categorization of or identification with the characters. In the first episode, a number of actors who play the role of customers who chase away Orlando Zyklopa from the shopping mall are the same ones who appear a little later as the inhabitants of Freak City coming to town for their religious festival (as announced by a TV reporter standing in front of the Charlottenburg palace). In following episodes, we encounter the same actors as men in tight leather suits connoting gay subculture, who, however, are soon shown marching in military style, as they round up prisoners, among them Orlando Capricha, who is forced to wear a black

hood once she is captured. Immediately afterwards, a long shot shows the Lederboys with black trash bags (resembling long hoods) covering their entire bodies. As they march towards the camera, they burst out of the hoods, and what follows is one of the most haunting and revealing sequences of the film.

This sequence connects the violence of medieval Europe with that of its twentieth century horrors by showing two processions, followed by successive shots. Parallel shots follow the progression of two processions. We follow the progression of the two processions through two sequences edited parallel. So, we see two monks freeing Orlanda Capricha, who is tied in chains to a wall, only to capture her afresh and cover her head with a black plastic hood. Galli, the “famous dwarf painter”,<sup>132</sup> cuts openings in the hood to enable Orlanda Capricha to mutely witness the scenes that follow, as close-up shots of her eyes reflect these horrors. The monks lead her along with a few other prisoners, one of them a woman tied to a tree (reminiscent of women tied to stakes during medieval witch hunts). Interspersed with this sequence, we see a band of men in leather suits and steel masks, marching in unison like soldiers and rounding up groups of people with disabilities, old men, an Amazon etc. As both groups are shown progressing from the left and right of the screen respectively, these two parallel sequences are themselves interspersed by shots of other prisoners in modern prison cells. With both processions marching forward, medium long shots and overhead establishing shots intercut the scenes

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<sup>132</sup> This is how the introductory text to the film describes this figure on the filmmaker’s website. Link: <http://www.ulrikeottinger.com/index.php/776/articles/introduction.html> Accessed in March 2014. Galli’s name, although not referred to in the dialogues within the film, evokes the name of Gallus, the eunuch priest of Goddess Cybele in ancient Rome, whose rituals included castration, flagellation, and crossdressing. Tamara Green describes these rituals in her article “The Presence of the Goddess in Haran.”. (See Vermaseren, 1996.) She mentions that Roman citizens (until the third century BC) were not allowed to become Galli, which meant that the Galli priests were usually either “orientals” or slaves (96). In the film, Galli the dwarf-painter is shown wearing a robe that resembles that of medieval monks and seems to be a reworking of figures related to mythology along the lines of the first episode, which fuses the figures of Orlando, Cyclops, and the seven dwarves.

to show various other prisoners in a range of bound states – from medieval dungeon-like positions of being stretched and bound on wooden frames through iron chains, to prisoners with barely standing room in cramped, solitary confinement cells recalling modern high security prisons. It is noteworthy, however, that even the scenes that show prisoners tied with medieval torture implements have a conspicuous contemporary, industrial mise-en-scene with bright white lighting and prison cells that are revealed to be located inside giant white drums, which in turn appear to be a part of a factory. In an important moment in the middle of this sequence, the two processions merge as the monks meets the band of marching men and hand over their prisoners to the leather men in steel masks. Taking charge of Orlanda Capricha, the leather men now tie her to the front of a hospital bed as the rest of the prisoners are thrown in them. In a corner of the scene, the dwarf-painter is shown frantically recording the scene by sketching it. The camera pans in a medium long shot to show Orlando Capricha tied to the front of a long chain of hospital beds attached to each other. The chain of beds form a train that foreshadows deportation trains to extermination camps. In pairs, the Lederboys now visit different spaces – a dilapidated house with a tree to which a woman is tied, the scene recalling medieval witch hunts; two old men shown in profile in front of a fresco fondling each other's pointed beards, almost reduced to a representation themselves as they merge with the painted scene in the background; an Amazon who stands tall surveying the scene around her but is soon captured, and so on. The prisoners are then tied in the train of hospital beds as the contingent of Lederboys march them to the wide greens of an Olympic stadium, evoking the horrors of National Socialism.

Bare life, Agamben explains, is “life exposed to death” (88). According to him, “the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed” (80). In the sequence described above, the “freaks” are led to the arena of sports, which celebrates the proficiency of the “normal” body, and which taken to its logical end, degenerates into National Socialism’s glorification of the “Aryan” body and extermination of those that did not fit into their idea of it. Ottinger, in fact, shoots the beginning of this scene, when the Olympic stadium (where the prisoners are led by the marching contingent of uniformed men) first appears in the frame through low angle shots that strongly recall images from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* celebrating the athletes. In *Freak Orlando*, however, it is the dwarves who are the focus of the low angle shot (in this case, the dwarf painter, Galli) as the Olympic Stadium towers behind them, through whose empty grounds they will soon disappear. Through these scenes, therefore, the film emphasizes the aspect of political power that Agamben describes, that is the right to sit in judgment over the bare life (zoé) of a person – which is what forms the basis of sovereign power and which Nazism and fascism transformed into “the supreme political principle” (10).

It should also be noted that the figures that we see being led into the Olympic stadium (chained in a deportation train of hospital beds) are those that appear in various moments shown throughout the film. They are not restricted to only one or the other time period, although the final shot of the Olympic stadium in this episode is a clear reference to National Socialism. A brief but important scene described earlier connects prisoners from the period depicting Spanish inquisition with the “freaks” gathered by twentieth century fascists within one scene, since both groups are led together and bound onto the

hospital-bed deportation trains. This scene, too, illustrates Agamben's point about biopolitics and the decision over bare life as the basis of political power. He emphasizes that this aspect is characteristic of sovereign power from its beginnings, and not only, as Foucault contended, restricted to the modern era. "When life and politics – originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man's land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life – begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception"(148). This is a crucial aspect of power and its target – the body and the decision over bare life – that Ottinger manages to show in her film and thus highlight the violence that connects different periods in the history of Europe.

## **2. Freak Shows and Beauty Contests**

Although Agamben's discussion of bare life is more helpful in approaching the broader arc of the film in its engagement with European history and violence, Rosemarie Thomson's discussion of the specific nature of the discourse of the freak show is also useful in understanding other aspects of the film's focus on freak shows as spectacle. In the episode following the one described above, Mr Orlando emerges from a psychiatric clinic and encounters a "freak show" replete with figures that would have typically been a part of such shows in the nineteenth century (for instance, dwarves, a woman without a stomach, Siamese twins, etc). However, the troupe also conspicuously includes costumed figures (with false beaks for noses, for instance), thereby introducing the idea of "artificial freaks" and thus questioning the boundary between the natural and the cultural that the idea of freaks rests upon.

Thomson describes the increasing standardization of everyday life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the parallel rise in interest in the freak body

as a commercial public spectacle (5).<sup>133</sup> For many decades, freak shows remained successful ventures in America and Europe, though they increasingly came to be identified with low public culture around the turn of the century. Their eventual disappearance by the middle of the twentieth century is insightfully explained by Thomson not as a disappearance but as a proliferation and normalization “dispersal of the freak show discourse into an array of representational other modes [...] some of which, may not be recognizable today at first glance”(13). She gives examples of such dispersal:

Genetics, embryology, anatomy, teratology and reconstructive surgery – the discrete, high scientific discourses that now pathologize the extraordinary body – were once closely linked with the showmen’s display of the freak body. The equally elite discourses of anthropology and ethnology, as well as museum culture and taxidermy, were inseparable from the display of freaks in the early nineteenth century. The entertainment discourses of vaudeville, circuses, beauty pageants, zoos, horror films, rock celebrity culture, and Epcot center have descended from the freak show, to which displays of these kinds were once fused. (13)

Apart from Thomson’s identification of the continuation of this discourse, Robert Bodgan’s point about freaks as not a quality of a person but “a perspective, a set of practices” is also useful in understanding the following sequence from the film (x).<sup>134</sup> In the final and fifth episode of *Freak Orlando*, the film juxtaposes figures that were once a part of freak shows with contemporary rituals and practices that are still informed by the same discourse, but whose connection to them remains invisible because of their privileged place in the normative discourse. One such practice inverted by the film is that of the beauty contest and this last episode is illustrative of the film’s inversion of normative bourgeois order occurs in one of the final sequences, in which an annual contest of the ugly takes place in order to decide the winner. Among the participants are groups of crippled leather men with radioactivity signs on their arms, people with paper

<sup>133</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson. *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 1996.

<sup>134</sup> Robert Bodgan. *Freak Shows: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, 1988.

bags on their heads, midgets, wounded patients, and in an ironic exaggeration of the cliché of normative femininity, four women dressed as Playboy-bunnies (one of them played by Delphine Seyrig). While three jurors in suits sit perched on tall seats like referees at a game, the participants come to perform on stage. Before the contest has ended, however, the store manager Herbert Zeus, whom we saw in the first episode, inadvertently hurries past, halting on the way to ask the announcer for directions. As she tries to hush him, the jurors unanimously proclaim him as the winner of the ugliest person contest. The audience cheers and a flattered Zeus accepts the award. Dressed in business attire, he is depicted as having a matter of fact and professional approach. His normativity is exaggerated by giving the character a comical name that combines a common male name with that of the mythical ruler of Olympian gods “Herbert Zeus”, and he is jubilantly crowned as the ugliest. Zeus is the only character in the film (with the exception of the three jurors) who is conspicuously made to fit the contemporary bourgeois ideal of the “normal” and the “respectable” individual, and he is paired at the end with the Playboy Bunny as they both walk off into a painted sunset. Typical of Ottinger’s strategy of exaggeration, the hegemony of the “normal” is thus both mocked and inverted.

### **3. Shopping Malls and Mythologies**

The investigation of the “normal” that underlies this inversion in the film may be connected to Roland Barthes’ examination of everyday life in France and the contemporary myths that pervade it.<sup>135</sup> Barthes describes such myths as second order semiological systems, which serve to transform codes and concepts by naturalizing them. He focuses on the culture of consumption and how our everyday rituals and preferences

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<sup>135</sup> Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, 1972, 1991.

are embedded in this “anonymous ideology” and its representation of our relation with the world: “These ‘normalized’ norms attract little attention, by the very fact of their extension, in which their origin is easily lost” (139). In the section on “Myth as stolen language”, Barthes discusses the (im)possibilities of resistance to myth since they too become “the prey of myth”. An alternative that he emphasizes is the “artificial myth”:

It thus appears that it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth. (134)

Ottinger’s focus on the shopping mall seems to be one such attempt at mythifying the contemporary myth, by connecting it to the realm of ancient mythology. The juxtaposition of the two spheres of ancient myths as well as contemporary urban spaces with their own second-order myths (in Barthes’ sense) has the effect of defamiliarizing the present, thus enabling us to evaluate it afresh. Ottinger’s remark in an interview substantiates this too, “Ich bin mir sicher, daß Dinge, die sich uns heute als Mythen erscheinen, auf recht alltägliche Ereignisse oder Erlebnisse zurückgehen.“ (Frey 45) This observation of ancient myths referring back to everyday events and experiences is inverted in the film to reveal the mythical in the everyday life of post-war Germany. Since the 1950s, West Germany had experienced economic growth bolstered by the US backed Marshal Plan and a quasi-religious belief in the powers of the market. Images of the post-war reconstruction and recovery of Germany frequently centered around a booming consumer culture represented by busy shopping malls. Ottinger thus chooses to



critique a space central to modern western consumer society, a space closely associated with the circulation of myths of success, happiness and well-being, which work by naturalizing (and thus erasing) their own historicity. By the 1970s and 80s, however, West German economy was showing signs of stagnation, while the lifestyles associated with shopping malls had also come increasingly under attack with left-wing radicalization of the students' movement in West Germany. Although on the one hand, shopping malls served as targets of countercultural criticism, on the other hand, popular symbols of anti-consumerist politics were themselves getting appropriated as (in Barthes' sense) newly codified myths of resistance to be bought in shopping malls. In the light of the myth's signification of the very resistance against itself, the scene in the shopping mall in this film serves as an example of Ottinger's critique, which can be connected to Barthes' idea of mythification of the myth as a weapon against the second-order myth. This connection becomes clearer in the very first episode of the film, briefly mentioned earlier, which is examined next in more detail.

In the first sequence after the prologue of the film, characters from fairytales and those from Greek mythology come together in the contemporary setting of a shopping mall. In the first episode, Orlando appears as Orlando Zyklopa<sup>136</sup> wearing a tall hat with a single eye painted on it. The shopping mall, (from which Orlando Zyklopa is later banished by the store manager Herbert Zeus), is shown hosting a sale of myths ("Ausverkauf der Mythen"). A shopping mall announcer Frau Müller (played by Delphine Seyrig) describes their "Mythologische Aktionswoche", where their star attraction is the goddess Orlando Zyklopa who stamps shoes with her special seal. She is

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<sup>136</sup> Part of the name here evokes the Cyclops from Greek mythology, the ironsmith giants set free by Zeus, who repaid him by creating his thunderbolts.

shown striking the anvil as a blacksmith would, and is accompanied by, (instead of other Cyclops), seven dwarves who assist her. She stands apart in a lit up cubicle bounded by plastic sheets as she carries on working and buyers walk past or get their shoe soles stamped at this “Schnellsohlerei”. By locating these figures in a modern shopping mall and by juxtaposing the commercial and the mythical, gods and goods, Ottinger provides a trenchant critique of contemporary quasi-religious belief in the power of the market. This religious belief is underscored later in the scene, as Orlando Zyklopa is asked, “Welche Marke vertreten Sie?”, “Glauben Sie als Göttin an Gott?”, “Haben Sie den Privatbesitz?”, and finally, as a consumer waves his plastic bag under her nose, „Glauben Sie wenigstens an meiner Plastiktüte?” Ottinger thus also highlights the persistence of old forms of myths in the new – in this case, the shopping mall as the new temple. The everyday rituals and codes of the consumer capitalist spaces like shopping malls (weekly sales, brand loyalty, etc.) are revealed as contemporary beliefs that hark back to ancient religious rituals and myths. Yet, on the one hand, the film shows the inverse, more common trend too, which is evident in the same scene. Orlanda and the dwarves are shown contained in a booth, as they stamp shoe soles for the shopping mall customers, stamps which contain the words “Ausverkauf der Mythen”. This scene thematizes how mythology and fantasy themselves are commodified and thus cannibalized by capitalist consumer culture by appropriating old mythical symbols and ritualistic forms.

The juxtaposition of the contemporary commercial and the ancient mythical also continues through the character of Herbert Zeus, the store manager. As the store announcer Frau Müller gazes longingly at Orlando Zyklopa, he interrupts her saying, “Träumen ist hier verboten, Fräulein Müller”, exhorting her to continue with

announcements regarding the sale of myths. The fact that Ottinger places this scene in a space of commercial advertisements and products, which base themselves on selling dreams to consumers, makes her critique about the “commodification of representation” even sharper (Rickels 2008, 83). It points to the stifling normativity of consumer societies, where radical alternatives are either unacceptable or appropriated into the commercial discourse. “Was ich daran spannend finde, ist der Aspekt, daß in unserer Gesellschaft alles, auch die Extreme kommerzialisiert werden – und daß das Entertainment auf alle Bereiche übergreift. Alles wird einverleibt und problemlos integriert. Bestimmte Verhaltensweise werden umgekehrt, aber im Grunde genommen nicht verändert.“ (Frey 47).<sup>137</sup> In the announcer being forbidden to dream and in the eventual banishment of Orlando Zyklopa and the seven dwarves (to the obvious agitation of the announcer), the film therefore highlights the intolerance and exclusion of mythology and fantasy as well as the imagination that connects them both in capitalist consumer culture. The juxtaposition of the commercial space of a shopping mall with figures from mythology and fairytales also points towards Barthes’ explanation of how myths can appropriate virtually any sign, or in this case, how even pre-modern forms can be appropriated within the market system as niche-products and by placing Orlando Zyklopa as a “star attraction” providing “mythological sandals” as part of the sales week, Ottinger highlights and parodies this process by literalizing it. In doing so, Ottinger thus not only manages to mythify a central space associated with contemporary myths (the shopping mall), but does so in a manner that (even if not entirely closed to) at least resists

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<sup>137</sup> Another instance of this presented in the film is through the fact that Orlando’s final transformation, before leaving Freak City is that into an entertainer, the host of a show reminiscent of typical commercial shows, although in this case the beauty ideals that permeate such shows are inverted into the Festival of the Ugly.

easy appropriation. I believe that this has to do with an element of excess that builds a part of her strategy. This excess is that which carries over, for instance through the names and characters of mythological figures and fairy tales, which are already being appropriated in a new story, and are thus saturated with meaning. They, therefore, cannot easily be *reduced* to one meaning or the other. Even the *form* is difficult to fill, in this case; it resists instrumentalisation since it's not even entirely abstract – as in Barthes' example of avant garde poetry's resistance to language also serving as a new sign to be appropriated by myths. Barthes' points out how myths tend to saturate the sign with a new meaning (and by choosing such signs that are already emptied out. This scene in the shopping mall, instead, is already saturated not with a direct meaning (the dwarves' and Zyklopa do not play expected roles) but with an excess that is resonant with its past use (as part of other stories, of Snow White, of Zeus' thunderbolt and so on), and is therefore difficult to fill with new ones.

Another way in which Ottinger critiques this appropriation is through the use of excess as exaggeration. In the first episode, for instance, the familiarity of the modern urban space of a shopping mall is interrupted not only through Orlando Zyklopa and her seven dwarves, but also by the costumes of the customers that surround her. Ottinger conveys a sense of claustrophobia here, by exaggerating the commonplace in the form of the most used material in commercial and industrial life, namely, plastic. All customers appear covered in shiny plastic wraps, holding plastic shopping bags in each hand. The similarity of the plastic material that envelops the consumers and the bags in which they carry their purchases lends the characters an appearance of the very products they buy and also renders them as consumer objects. Moreover, Ottinger's strategy of presenting

her critique through rich visual associations (rather than directly planted as dialogues, etc), makes each scene work on multiple levels. While on the one hand, the scene highlights the absurdity of the everyday rituals that pass as normal, on the other hand, it shows a continuation of past modes of behavior in outwardly different forms. Although the episode described above works as a satire on the reification (*Verdinglichung*) of the individual in modern capitalist society and the commodity fetishism that permeates it, this aspect also sheds light on Europe's relation to both its internal as well as external others. As Ottinger elaborates, "Inquisition, fascism, repressive psychiatry. The various methods of repression available change according to the time. But the structures in fact remain frighteningly similar" (289).<sup>138</sup>

## Conclusion

If *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* is the staging of the encounter with the exotic in the form of Mongolia as a non-European other, *Freak Orlando* brings to the forefront Europe's internal others. The two films, in fact, reveal connections between internal and external others, since both serve as projection surfaces through which the normative inscribes itself. For instance, Europe's self-definition as the civilized and rational depended on the non-European cultures that it defined as primitive, and irrational. A sequence that highlights this is from the third episode of *Freak Orlando*, where a procession of "freaks" pronouncing themselves as a "Side-Show" invite Herr Orlando to join them. One only has to recall the ethnographic spectacles especially popular in the nineteenth century Germany to see the similarity between the Völkerschau spectacles and this procession, although in the latter case it is the normative audience that is absent.

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<sup>138</sup> Ulrike Ottinger. "Ein Werkstattgespräch. Die Collage ist die Form, in der man heute denkt, Ulrike Ottinger im Gespräch mit Peter Kremski" *Kinemathek*, 86.

However, this connection between definitions of the self and the other is not only related to Europe and non-Europe. Within individual nations too, the idea of a single unified national culture invariably involves populations that do not fit in, are excluded as “freaks”, and used to inversely define belongingness. In both cases, the normative disguises its own role in this construction and presents itself as natural and legitimate.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva discusses how foreignness is based on negation. “Who is a foreigner? The one who does not belong to the group, who is not “one of them”, the other. The foreigner, as it has often been noted, can only be defined in negative fashion. Negative with respect to what? The other of what group?”. In *Freak Orlando*, Ottinger interrupts this relation in a way that does not subsume the other in an inverse relation to the normal. Instead, by giving center stage, for the entire two hour length of the film, to the many categories of the “other” that are typically excluded from what is regarded as “normal”, and by presenting the episodes featuring them as world history, Ottinger questions our own implicit expectations and biases as spectators as well as that of a historiography that completely silences these groups. Historical narrative is thus revealed as an instrument of power while also highlighting its potential for subversion. In *Johanna*, Ottinger targets a different kind of othering – that of the seemingly benign interest that passes itself off as exoticism. In this film, the spectator’s habitual perspective of the exotic is inverted through various strategies of repetition and excess till the exotic begins to appear commonplace and quotidian and is later revealed in its staging as a performance. In an interview, Ottinger insightfully connects the othering that is at the basis of both romanticizing or glorifying the other as well as persecuting it (an aspect that is also evident in the figure of Orlando Zyklopa, who is both worshipped

as goddess as well as persecuted): “Ich frage mich aber, ob es nicht strukturell etwas ganz Ähnliches ist, ob man jemanden anbetet, oder ob man jemanden, weil er anders ist, tötet.” (Frey 45)

Although *Freak Orlando* highlights the continuation of repressive mechanisms across the history of Europe, when seen together with *Johanna*, it also provides vital links between the external others of Europe as targets of colonial oppression and the internal others of Europe, who are included in its history through their exclusion. These internal others, the “freaks” we see – the mentally ill, the disabled, homosexuals, dwarves – on the train of hospital beds in *Freak Orlando* are precisely the ones that were mass murdered in the camps. By bringing the silenced figures to the forefront and representing them as protagonists in a theater of European history, Ottinger provides an aesthetic reflection of the past in the present, of the connection of fascist violence to other repressive structures, all culminating in camps but also in the form of other reifications that form a part of contemporary western societies. Then again, *Johanna* deals with the figures who were themselves a part of the fantastical discourse of the phantasmagoria of mythical, monstrous “freaks” that was evident in early colonial travel narratives. By the nineteenth century this discourse, proliferated and transformed by European colonial expansion, had manifested into successful commercial enterprises of ethnographic displays that focused on “primitive” peoples. Through *Johanna*’s playful invitation of viewer’s own projections of the East and the West and the subsequent dismantling of these projections by means of the film’s final scene, the non-European others as well as their representations are themselves shown as deeply implicated in colonial power structures. On the other hand, by continuously displacing such projections and through

various strategies of excess, Ottinger also mobilizes the uncanny strangeness to examine the abjected others. One could thus link the abjection of the colonial other to the internal other, whose reifications are themselves based upon the lack that forms the basis of the norm. As Julia Kristeva elaborates in *Powers of Horror*,<sup>139</sup>

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (4)

In the next chapter, we shall see how Fichte tackles the link between the abjection of the colonial other as well as Germany's internal others and pushes the boundaries of their representation. Whereas this chapter sought to understand how Ottinger approaches these questions and achieves a heightened indeterminacy by employing various aesthetic strategies, including that of excess, the next chapter shall examine how Hubert Fichte does so by using the aesthetic strategies of fragmentation and relentless summons to attend to the primacy of language in epistemology.

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<sup>139</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, 1982.



### Chapter III

#### Hubert Fichte's *Die Palette* and *Petersilie*

Hubert Fichte, like Ulrike Ottinger, also challenges the colonial underpinnings of ethnography and attempts a more open exploration of underground subcultures and representation of Germany's internal others, and other cultures and representations of non-European others, while also simultaneously laying bare the limitations of representation. The works of both artists inhabit what Katrin Sieg calls "a border zone between ethnography and erotic fantasy" (188).<sup>140</sup> Whereas critics have discussed the use of writing and identity, the concept of travel, sadomasochism, and the interconnectedness of self and the other in his works, this chapter focuses on the specific aesthetic strategies that Fichte uses to push the boundaries of representation of the other through two of his works: *Die Palette* (1968) and *Petersilie* (1980). The former work focuses on the underground subcultures of 1960s Hamburg, approaching this through a chronicling of the everyday life at Palette, a local bar located in the Sankt Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg. The latter work, written more than a decade later, is an account of the travels Fichte undertook with Leonore Mau in Santo Domingo, Venezuela, Miami, and Grenada. This chapter will explore the registers in which Hubert Fichte pushes the boundaries of representation of the other – whether these are the internal others of Germany that figure in *Die Palette*, or the external non-European others of *Petersilie* – by privileging art as an ethnographic mode.

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<sup>140</sup> Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 2002.

Through a close reading of these two works by Hubert Fichte, this chapter analyzes the aesthetic strategies he employs to challenge the notions that were central to traditional anthropology – a totalizing, Eurocentric concept of knowledge, a disregard for the epistemological role of language, and the scientific claim to objectivity. Fichte challenges these through a variety of aesthetic strategies that revolve around fragmentation and a focus on the primacy of language, both of which work to heighten the indeterminacy of the text and challenge our expectations as readers of the genres of travel writings and ethnographies. He does so in order to underscore the relational aspect of categories like space, time, cultures, etc., which had previously been taken for granted as enclosed systems in anthropology. After outlining the literary reception of *Die Palette* and *Petersilie*, I discuss some of the aesthetic strategies used in both the works, which focus on failures and contradictions, involve an understanding of ethnographic research as one of “sprachliche Correspondance”, and emphasize multiple connections and layers. These experimental strategies highlight indeterminacy and interrupt old ways of seeing and understanding. But, more than that, they also produce a radically different way of seeing. The fourth section of this chapter attempts to describe what the use of these aesthetic strategies yields by discussing the importance of the relational aspect that informs Fichte’s understanding of everything from the spatial and temporal to the biographical and the subjective. In the conclusion, I use Rheinberger’s<sup>141</sup> concept of experimental system to draw out the import of Fichte’s aesthetic strategies and how they enable submerged narratives to surface and the unthought to be experienced.

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<sup>141</sup> Rheinberger. *On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay*, 2010.

## Section I. Literary Reception

*Die Palette* (1968) was Fichte's third novel and the last part of the trilogy that consisted of *Das Waisenhaus* (1965) and *Detlevs Imitationen* (1971). In both the earlier novels, he recounted his experiences growing up in National Socialist Germany as a "Mischling erster Grades", as well as a child theater actor after the war. *Die Palette* describes the Hamburg subculture and derives its name from the popular bar that Fichte regularly visited in the St Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg and which closed down in 1964.

The very aspects that make *Die Palette* innovative and thought provoking have also been the ones that initially received an unfavorable reception among the critics, who criticized its fragmented form and lack of a coherent story. Reinhard Baumgart, for instance, called Fichte's style "Realismus als l'art pour l'art", where the disconnectedness of individual facts does not lead to any theme and simply stays at the level of random observation (33).<sup>142</sup> Similarly, Helmuth Karasek complains that Fichte splits *Palette* into contradictory little parts that cannot be put together to make sense as a whole. He too laments the pointlessness of the details.<sup>143</sup> Wolfgang Nagel praises the precision of language Fichte uses and the fact that despite precise details he doesn't aim for completeness.<sup>144</sup> But he laments the incomprehensibility of many parts of the work, because they assume a prior knowledge of the Hamburg subculture. This sort of reception of the novel, thus, largely ignored the crucial implications of Fichte's particular aesthetic strategies, which were deliberately calling a totalizing concept of knowledge and

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<sup>142</sup> Reinhard Baumgart. "Eine wüste Idylle" *Hubert Fichte. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*. Ed. Thomas Beckermann, 1985.

<sup>143</sup> Helmuth Karasek. "Gammler – zu Prosa kleingehackt." Beckermann, 1985.

<sup>144</sup> Wolfgang Nagel. "Stoff aus Wörtern." Beckermann, 1985.

understanding into question, and which were also challenging the power relations that underlie such claims to totality, that is, in the Eurocentric views forming the basis ethnographies of “exotic” cultures but also within the normative view of German culture that excludes and delegitimizes those that deviate from it. For instance, it is not that Fichte unfairly assumes from his readers a prior knowledge of the particular language of Hamburg subcultures; his point, instead, is to challenge precisely the kind of hegemonic thinking that invisibilizes groups which deviate from a normative idea of German identity.

By the time Fichte published *Petersilie* over a decade later, the reception of his work had become more positive. For instance, Aurel Schmidt acknowledges the importance of syncretism and the relevance of Fichte’s focus on the hybrid, the momentary and the distorted, aspects which have been traditionally ignored by anthropology in favor of the pure, the ancient, and the authentic. He describes Fichte’s literary technique as filmic, since it provides tightly packed information in a series of short images, which lets reality surge through rather than being neatly organized (174).<sup>145</sup> Hans Jürgen Heinrichs underscores the importance of language and its epistemological function in ethnographic work, and what he terms as Fichte’s materialistic style because of its heightened attention to the material of language,<sup>146</sup> whereas Wolfgang von Wangenheim rightly acknowledges an increased dominance of the political aspect within the religious in *Petersilie*.<sup>147</sup> Beate Klöckner echoes the critics of *Die Palette* in accusing Fichte of not taking language seriously, (she complains about Fichte not even bringing

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<sup>145</sup> Aurel Schmidt. “Petersilie: Hubert Fichtes poetische Anthropologie.” Beckermann, 1985.

<sup>146</sup> Hans Jürgen Heinrichs. “Aufbruch in eine neue Welt.” Beckermann, 1985.

<sup>147</sup> Wolfgang von Wangenheim. “Milchbad, Blutbad.” Beckermann, 1985.

his sentences to end sometimes). She also criticizes his work for exploiting exotic themes and marginal figures, and describes this engagement as easier than one focusing on the normal and the real (193).<sup>148</sup> In her critique, therefore, Klöckner too undermines the implications of Fichte's insistence on the fragmentary. It is the importance of the fragmentary that I will attempt to highlight in the following two sections, along with the other aesthetic strategies that Fichte employs in order to challenge traditional ethnographic writing that prides itself in and aspires toward a (totalizing) command of the ethnographic object.

## **Section II. *Die Palette* (1968)**

Published in 1968, *Die Palette* is an account of Hamburg's subcultures as experienced by Fichte through the various people he regularly met over a span of three years at the eponymous local pub. The novel therefore is an amalgamation of his conversations with people there, his observations, as well as his childhood memories of Hamburg. Although Fichte describes his biographical experiences in this work, he does so through a narrator, his alter-ego Jäcki, as well as through references to the writer. As the first page of the novel reveals, Fichte began working on the novel on Palette as it closed down during his visit to Sesimbra in Portugal, which he visited in 1963/64 with Leonore Mau. The book is divided into seventy six sections. The first section of the book stresses the relationality of space to time and sets the tone for the rest of the work as both, ethnography of the everyday and ethnography of memories. The memories that are described in the novel do not occur in a chronological form that centers around Fichte's

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<sup>148</sup> Beate Klöckner. "Zivilisation und Wildnis." Beckermann, 1985.

own memories but are presented in juxtaposition with the childhood memories of the other figures.

The form of the book is not that of a smoothly flowing, linear narrative, although at times Fichte's repeated visits to the Palette come up as numbered section titles. On the whole, however, the book is composed of fragments that are juxtaposed together in various thematic sections. Through these fragments, Fichte presents a complex picture of the Hamburg subcultures that thrived in this space at the time: prostitutes, transgendered, homosexuals, pimps, and other groups who usually would not appear in a historical account. Based on everyday observations and conversations, this work appears as both a historical account of the particular mood that was specific to this place and time, as well as ethnography of the everyday lives of the people who frequented it.

### **1. Failure of a Chronicle Foretold**

Although Fichte refers to this book as a chronicle of Palette and himself as a chronicler in several places within the work, and although his interest in ethnographic work has been evident in his entire oeuvre, *Die Palette* challenges both genres and their basic assumptions and conventions. Although chronicle as a genre has existed from the ancient times, it particularly thrived in the medieval times, and although it started to wane from the sixteenth century onwards, chronicles about the new world began to be popularized because of both political and institutional support during the colonizing process. As Luciana Beroiz explains in her dissertation on European chronicles about the Americas, such chronicles (often describing the "new" world) typically worked to "make sense of the 'new' from the standpoint of the 'known'", that is, by "recreating it

according to European preconceptions and expectations” (19).<sup>149</sup> At the same time, there was an attempt to maintain a distance from the local culture being described. This was typically done through the frequent expression of surprise and wonder at local customs, etc., as well as through classification and taxonomy (Beroiz 258). Another characteristic of a traditional chronicle, which is considered a precursor to modern history, is a linear narrative. Chronicles recorded historical events in the order that they occurred and often based themselves on an objective standpoint. Although early chronicles presented information as they found it and didn’t try to separate facts from legends, such a perspective also assumed access to the totality of the subject of the chronicle.<sup>150</sup> A closer look at *Die Palette* reveals how Fichte takes on these characteristics and subverts them. He poses the first challenge through his choice of subject itself: instead of describing the time period through events revolving around those in power and those usually at the center of high culture.

Jäcki geht nun in die Oper. Da wird ein achtzigjähriger Avantgardist gefeiert und anschließend gibt es einen Empfang im Rathaus. Da ist das andre Hamburg versammelt, das von Horn und Lemcke, vom Poloclub und Michelsens Frühstücksstuben. Keiner als Transvestit, Schneevertreiber, Klotante, Lodd, Brüchebauer, Akutotrinker. (241)

Instead, we are presented these through minute (often seemingly mundane) details of the everyday life of urban underground and minority cultures within Germany, specifically within Hamburg of the sixties. For instance, the anti-nuclear demonstrations of the sixties are described from the perspective of the people participating, most of whom Fichte

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<sup>149</sup> Luciana Beroiz. *Geographies of Violence: Contemporary Chronicles of Violence in the Americas*, 2005. As an example, she highlights how Spain’s King Philip II created, for the Spanish America, the official post of a chronist (*cronista mayor*), who was expected to document the important moments of the colonization of the New World.

<sup>150</sup> M.H. Abrams, Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 2014.

knows from the Palette and other pubs in Reeperbahn, the red light area of Sankt Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg. In an ironic commentary of the comprehensiveness and totalizing categorization that usually accompanies an ethnographic work, Fichte also presents other possible ways of chronicling Palette through imaginary novels composed entirely of lists.

Einen Roman über die Palette in Katalogform:  
 Was essen die Gammler?  
 Was haben die Gammler für Krankheiten?  
 Was ziehen die Gammler an?  
 Welche Empfindungen haben die Gammler?  
 Einen Roman nur aus Empfindungen.  
 Einen Roman nur aus Erzählungen der Gammler über Gammler.  
 Einen nur aus ausgedachten Vorkommnissen. (330)

Fichte also inverts the distance usually maintained by chroniclers and modern historians. Moreover, the fragmented form further questions any claim to a totalizing knowledge of the subject of the chronicle, and this aspect is also noticeable in the title of the book. Though the content has obviously recognizable biographical and historical references, its title “Die Palette. Roman” further blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. At the same time, an acknowledgement of the failure forms an intrinsic part of this portrayal too, as illustrated in the excerpt below. Fichte admits that his attempt to chronicle the lives that revolve around Palette and its milieu would quite likely result in failure. He presents the inevitability of such a failure through imaginary reviews of his own work:

Jäcki würde schreiben:  
 - daß vielleicht jeder Chronist an der Palette scheitern muß.  
 Eine Analyse der verschiedenen Schichten der Wirklichkeit würde sich ins Uferlose verlieren. Jede bekannte Form schriftstellerische Synthese klammerte aber eben gerade all das Inkoherente, Doppelzüngige, Alberne, Vielbewußte und die gleichzeitigen eingeschränkten Bewußtheiten aus. Schreibmaschine oder der Kugelschreiber [...] wären gezwungen, eine kleingehackte, den Ereignissen und Personen nachhetzende Prosa zu erzeugen, die in dem Geschriebenen nicht den



Eindruck der Vielfalt hervorrufen könnte, sondern auf die Dauer nur den Eindruck der Langenweile. Jäcki würde also rezensieren:

- Es erscheint gleichfalls unmöglich mit Hilfe einer Collage, unter Hinzuziehung aller Sub- oder Superliterarischen Zitate, die in der Palette fallen, die Palette selbst deutlich werden zu lassen. (44, 45)

Although his interest is in catching the particular milieu of Palette and the liberating space it offered to those that did not fit within the dominant normative social modes, the very act of chronicling – where linearity is underscored – goes against his idea of representation of the self and the other, both of which he understood in non-essentialist terms as layered and interconnected. It is thus that his remark about the futility can be understood: if even an individual self is constituted of layers and too complex to be reduced to an essential core or a compact analysis that starkly differentiates it from the other, any social reality would be even more complex to be reduced to a neat analysis. But at the same time, all of Fichte's works show extreme attentiveness to socio-historical and economic contexts as well as individual biographical and psychological ones that underlie various subcultures – whether in the context of Sankt Pauli or that of Santo Domingo – and such historical references constitute an integral part of them. Therefore, Fichte does not argue for an essential futility based on radical relativization. Instead, he is occupied with the disingenuous smoothing over of the contradictory, the unknown, the inassimilable that forms the basis of not just ethnographies but most human sciences. In fact, it could even be said that the dispelling of discrepancies is an integral part of what informs the idea of western knowledge; this conceit is needed to forward any hypothesis, but also the kind of generalizations that serve as essential accomplices in maintaining normative power structures and the binaries that accompany them, for instance, barbaric versus civilized, underdeveloped versus developed, religious versus pagan, sensual versus

rational, and so on. Therefore, when Fichte underscores the futility of chronicling Palette, what he attacks is the traditional functionalist scientific paradigm that overwhelmingly informed anthropology at the time and that was invested in the idea of an objective anthropologist, who, unaffected by the milieu being studied, could analyze and provide deep insights about it. As has been well documented in the 80s linguistic turn in anthropology which began to analyze the rhetoric of this science, in this traditional kind of an ethnographic practice, there was of course no space for the contradictory, and what did not fit neat theorizations was conveniently smoothed over in the service of grand narratives. Fichte's concern seems to be, however, to keep the complexity of the momentary without reducing it for the sake of generalizations. This is why he insists on "kleingehackte" but wonders about its effect on the reader; he fears that this mode would engender (in the reader) boredom instead of recognition of the complexity of the subject at hand. At the same time, what accompanies the remark about the failure of the chronicler is the compelling question: what if this futility itself is the goal? This inclusion of failure in an ethnographic description of a subcultural milieu, presented as a fragmented novel during a time in Germany when even literature was deeply invested in authenticity and realism, posed a sharp provocation to the ethnographic genre that had remained unchallenged till that time.

In this regard, Fichte represents a sensibility that is aptly described in his own words as "poetische-Anthropologie", even as he attempts to present an ethnographic portrait of the varied people who frequented Palette based on their actual interactions and biographies. The poetic element (through fragments, through intertextual references, as well as the multiple connections that are discussed below) then helps maintain the

“Uferlose” aspect of a multifaceted time period and space, more than an exhaustive quantitative or scientific ethnographic text would. Max Horkheimer remarks about positivist methods:<sup>151</sup>

Modern science, as positivists understand it, refers essentially to statements about facts, and therefore presupposes the reification of life in general and of perception in particular. It looks upon the world as a world of facts and things, and fails to connect the transformation of the world into facts and things with the social process. [...] The so-called facts ascertained by quantitative methods, which the positivists are inclined to regard as the only scientific ones, are often surface phenomena that obscure rather than disclose the underlying reality. (56-57)

Horkheimer is critical of positivism for its limited approach to reality, but he also divides reality between “surface phenomena” and the “underlying reality”. Fichte’s approach is different in that he blurs the difference between surface and depth. The kaleidoscopic views he presents of Palette neither exhibit quantitative facts as reality, nor do they proclaim to uncover the underlying reality of this milieu. What they do is present various points of connection in a manner that underscores the limits of representation and highlights the inexhaustibility of the ethnographic “object”. Instead of reifying it, this process opens up the object as multidimensional and makes it possible for it to be self-representing subject(s) instead. Whether Fichte succeeds in this or not will remain a matter of contention among critics; but that this is his goal is quite evident from the content as well as the form of his work. This is also why his mock self-review cited above mentions the idea of letting the Palette present itself through collage form, “die Palette...selbst deutlich werden zu lassen”, while also acknowledging the impossibility of succeeding at such a task. Failure and impossibility of representation therefore become key elements that work within Fichte’s poetic-ethnographic project and by including

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<sup>151</sup> Max Horkheimer. *Eclipse of Reason*, 1973.

these in a work that is a chronicle and an ethnography of sorts, Fichte challenges the traditional epistemological basis of western anthropological knowledge about the other.

## 2. Einige Wörter kommen aus der Emigration zurück<sup>152</sup>

Although the *Writing Culture* debate of the 1980s brought into focus the role of rhetoric in Anthropology, Fichte's works from the 1960s and 1970s already illustrate this preoccupation, which arose from his critique of traditional Anthropology. In his *Ketzerische Bemerkungen für eine neue Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (1976),<sup>153</sup> Fichte derides the dismissal of the importance of language in human sciences:

Warum dürfen die Wissenschaften vom Menschen gerade das vernachlässigen,  
was den Menschen – wenn man vom Feuermachen absieht – vom Tier  
unterscheidet. Die poetisch komponierte Aussage.  
Auch Sprachform ist positive Information, und wovon informiert mich die  
Sprache der positiven Wissenschaften in vielen Fällen?  
Von Mief, Spiessertum, Blähung, und Schnurren!  
Poetisch freilegen, meine ich – nicht zupoetisieren. (363)

The imagery of archaeological excavation or uncovering that Fichte uses ("freilegen") goes together with the notion of layers which informs both his writing process as well as his understanding of subjectivity. His belief in "Worte sind Verhaltensweisen" is well illustrated in *Die Palette*, where he is at his most direct about the primacy of language and its role in epistemology. In fact, it informs his conception of this work itself. Among the possibilities of various novels about Palette, he highlights this one within the same work:

Einen Roman, der die Dinge nicht benennt und die Vorkommnisse, sondern  
ersetzt:  
Heidi und Barbara als Wörter selbst.  
Nichts über Halleluja und Barbara berichten.

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<sup>152</sup> *Palette* (50).

<sup>153</sup> Henceforth referred to as KB.

Sie nachmachen in Wörtern.  
 Gegenstoff. Metawörter. Antigrammatik.  
 Für eine Metabuchmesse. (331)

By rejecting the process of naming (“die Dinge nicht benennt”) and acknowledging this form of ethnographic writing as a replacement (“ersetzt”) instead, Fichte confronts a key aspect that defines the ethnographer’s relation to the ethnographic object: the power to name. While traditional ethnography gave primacy to taxonomy and classification posing as an objective, totality of knowledge about a specific cultural other, Fichte privileges acknowledging and highlighting the constructionism at the basis of such knowledge about the other. In doing so, he challenges the centrality of totalizing knowledge, which informs both the genres of ethnography and chronicle and which lay importance on an understanding that is based on viewing the ethnographic object as a closed system that needs to be captured through a comprehensive overview. Fichte, instead, privileges fragmentation and the indeterminacy it generates, but he also highlights the material that forms the basis of knowledge – language itself.

Instead of claiming to represent Heide and Barbara, two of the figures that occur in this work (and whom he met in the Palette), he focuses on the relation between language and subjectivity and calls for a mimicry in words. “Nachmachen” contains connotations of imitation and mimicry as well as that of time (“nachmachen” means to do something at a later time). The words “Sie nachmachen in Wörtern” (“to imitate them in words”) point towards this belatedness that is a primary aspect of writing itself and not merely of ethnographic writing. Although aiming to provide a sense of totality, the ethnographic voice often stresses the “presence,” since much of the credibility of the ethnographer’s fieldwork arises from the fieldwork, from the fact of having *been there*.

Yet, writing necessarily entails a belatedness, which is often not commented upon, and when so, it is usually to underscore an objective distance that lends the ethnographer a better overview. Highlighting the belatedness as well as the effort of imitating in words is another way in which Fichte's writing challenges the projection of a totality of knowledge in traditional ethnographic accounts.

Apart from underscoring the mimetic aspect of language (often ignored in ethnography before the 1980s), Fichte also turns the focus on the materiality and corporeality of the words themselves rather than only on the materiality of the objects they signify. Throughout this work, the attempt is to capture the languages spoken at Palette, particular slangs, turns of phrases etc, which are also presented as lists of words in sections titled "Paletten ABC" in the novel. This attention to linguistic formulations is evident in the excerpt below, which is a part of a section titled "Lexikon".

Jäcki liest Szagun. Dammtorlichtspiele. Ringo. Jäcki steht vor dem Gefallenendenkmal.

- Da schnallst du ab.
- Kernig! Wirklich dufte!
- Palädde.
- Zieh keine Schau ab!
- An der Matratze horchen heißt auch schlafen. Topflappen aufspannen heißt horchen.
- Aus dem Kreuz leiern.
- Schick mal einen durch!
- Wörter für Polizist: Senatscowboy, Blauer, Bulle, Polyp.
- Wörter mit B: Bestücken, beschäumen, Mücke bauen.
- Trabe machen.
- Auf den Kiez gehen. [...]

Mit den Gefallenen, die seit dreißig Jahren um den grauen Würfel marschieren, das Gewehr auf der falschen Schulter, wie der Kriegsdienstgegner Jäcki feststellt, trampeln andre Wörter durch Jäckis Kopf:

- Empor.
- Christlich-demokratisch.
- Verfremdung.
- Ritterkreuzträger.

- Axiom.

Das Wort kernig hat einen Stahlhelm auf. Das Wort abschnallen schläft über ihm. Andre Wörter kommen mit Kerze und Kreuz und Gasofen und wollen nach Ostland reiten:

- Entschlummern.
- Der Minderrassige.
- Feld der Ehre.
- den Segen für diesen Krieg.
- Unser lockiger Prinz.
- Kommunistenschwein.
- Judenschwein.
- Schwule Sau.
- Unser lockiger Prinz.

Einige Wörter kommen aus der Emigration zurück. Es gibt Wörter unter der Lupe. Ein Wort nimmt Schnee. Wörter mit roten Augen. Albinowörter. Wörter mit einer eingefärbten weißen Strähne im Haar. Zebrawörter. Wörter, die auf dem Kopf gehen. Wörter ohne Unterleib. Wörter mit einer Hand aus Leder. Wörter mit von unterm Knie an nix mehr. Wörter als Heilige Maria Magdalena. Mit dem Schiff bei Saints-Maries-de-la-Mer. Dame mit Bart Wörter. Ein Warzenwort. Bukkelwort. Kinderlähmungswort. Die Geschlechtskrankenwörter. Ein lachendes Ohr. Ein wandelnder Arm. Ein Wort macht es von hinten. Drei Wörter sind betrunken. Von einigen Wörtern ist nur der Vorname bekannt. Wörter leben unter falschen Namen. Ein Wort mit unehelichen Kindern. Eine Clique von Wörtern hat die Koffer schon für die Emigration gepackt. (48-50)

As this excerpt illustrates, the sensitivity towards words is not merely informed by an urge to classify the Palette jargon, but by the conviction of the need to be attentive to entire world views that exist in and through language. Language therefore is not considered a transparent lens through which to see our world but as itself affected by its historical context and in turn influencing it. Fichte mentions the military monument, locally referred to as the 76er Denkmal (for the 76<sup>th</sup> regiment which built it), which was constructed during the National Socialist period and that still existed in Dammtor in Hamburg in the sixties. The monument is in the form of a relief in a stone cube that shows a battalion marching from the right, with the words inscribed above it: “Deutschland muss leben und wenn wir sterben müssen”. The symbolism of the direction was more important to National-socialists than a realistic depiction of the march of

soldiers, which is why the soldiers are shown holding their weapons in the right hand instead of left, a fact also remarked upon in the excerpt above.<sup>154</sup> It is this symbol of the past continuing in the present that Fichte evokes as Jäcki contemplates words from the Palette. In the midst of these, we come across the reference to the military monument, followed by other words that “trample through Jäcki’s head”, words that denote, among other things, the current political atmosphere of the time: “empor, christlich-demokratisch, Verfremdung”, and so on. The Christian Democratic Union which was in power in the post-war years was known for incorporating former Nazis at high posts, especially till the 1960s.<sup>155</sup> When Fichte refers to it in juxtaposition with the National-socialist monument and the Christian-democrats, he is not only connecting the past and the present but also the effect of these traumatic histories on language. As Michael Rothberg points out in the context of confronting the Holocaust, the attempts at comprehending and representing it not only pose the demand of documentation and public communication, but also of reflection on the formal limits of representation (7).<sup>156</sup> Thus, a little after mentioning the monument dedicated to soldiers as well as references to “Ritterkreuzträger”,<sup>157</sup> “Der Minderrassige”, and “Gasofen”, all of which can only be presented as fragments (and not as whole sentences), we are presented a parade of

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<sup>154</sup> Jörgen Bracker cites the artist behind the monument, Richard Kuöhl, from „Hamburger Fremdenblatt“ of 25.7.1936: “Die aus wohlerwogenen Gründen gewählte Marschrichtung, wie sie das Denkmal zeigt, bei der die linke Körperseite dem Beschauer zugekehrt ist, ergab im übrigen die Möglichkeit, die Ausrüstung zu zeigen, die der Frontkämpfer im Weltkrieg besaß. Das Seitengewehr, der Spaten, die Beilpicke, der Brotbeutel, die Feldflasche, das Fernglas, die Kartentasche und Ordensauszeichnungen wären bei einem Marsch in entgegengesetzter Richtung höchstens andeutungsweise zu sehen gewesen. Die 76er legten verständlicherweise Wert darauf, Kämpfer so dargestellt zu sehen, wie sie sie aus dem Weltkrieg in Erinnerung haben“ (246). For more on this, see Jörgen Bracker. *Hamburg. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, 1987.

<sup>155</sup> Apart from top officials like Hans Globke, Theodor Oberländer and others, the most notable among such former National Socialists was Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a member of the CDU and the West German Chancellor from 1966-69.

<sup>156</sup> Michael Rothberg. *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 2000.

<sup>157</sup> Reference to “Knight’s Cross”, military medals of honor in National-socialist Germany.



deformed words: “Wörter ohne Unterleib. [...] Wörter mit von unterm Knie an nix mehr.” The phrases frequently heard in *Palette* of the 1960s are also interspersed within this litany: “Das Wort kernig hat einen Stahlhelm auf” and it is in this surrealist manner that Fichte represents a traumatic past that cuts right through the language of the present.

### 3. Schichten statt Geschichten<sup>158</sup>

In his novel *Versuch über die Pubertät*, Fichte privileges the idea of open, interconnected layers over closed stories (“Schichten statt Geschichten”). Although this novel was published six years after *Die Palette*, this idea is already presented in the latter too. On the surface this work appears fragmented and arbitrary, but upon a closer look, individual sections in *Die Palette* reveal various thematic constellations, which, instead of providing a seamless, comprehensive overview, bring up different perspectives that directly or tangentially relate to each other. At the same time, through the differences within the fragments, the themes at hand often open up more than a seamless narrative could have achieved. Consider, for instance, the section titled “Vater. Psychologie.” Just five pages long, this section begins by narrating Camille Desmoulin’s friendship with Sánti, both of whom Jäcki meets at the Palette. The description at first centers on Camille and Jäcki’s routine of picking up Sánti from his parents’ place and then goes on to enumerate the usual typical encounters with Sánti’s father. These are listed as patterns, namely, questions (You want to go out again tonight? When will you be back? Have you done your schoolwork?), orders (Don’t stay out late! You won’t get away from me anymore! You’ll stay right here!), or other injunctions (Don’t wear this tie! Wear the other jacket!).

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<sup>158</sup> “Layers instead of stories”. “Schichten statt Geschichten” is a quote from Fichte’s 1974 novel *Versuch über die Pubertät*, mentioned in subsequent references in this chapter as VP.

- Bind nicht diesen Schlips um!  
 - Zieh die andre Jacke an!  
 - Das ist ein Vater, denkt Jäcki. Einer, der nach Lux oder Palmolive riecht und nach Danziger Goldwasser. Der schlägt. Mit der Hand oder mit der Peitsche. Jäcki sieht seine Väter.  
 Der erste war sein Opa. (243)

The narrator now goes on to describe the father figures – real and imaginary – in Jäcki's life, and descriptions of his grandfather and godfather are succeeded by references to other historical figures:

Ludwig den Zweiten aus dem Stollwerckalbum von Herrn Lau hätte Jäcki gerne zum Vater gehabt und auch Friedrich Schiller.  
 Adolf Hitler war sein Vater, der Führer, und Horst Wessel, bis sich alles als Schummel herausstellte, weil er das deutsche Volk ins Unglück gestürzt hat.  
 (243)

Fichte's interest in the way language reveals the subject (rather than merely the object) manifests in his frequent use of clichés, slangs, and other turns of phrase peculiar to a specific time and space. This is evident in the ironic manner in which he uses the common exculpatory platitude of designating Hitler as the sole agent behind the crisis of the German nation. The changing reference plane from the familial to the national continues through the rest of this section too as the narrator describes the violent episode between Sänti and his father, the sexual harassment targeted at Jäcki by older men, and conversations with his National-socialist teacher. Jäcki's dislike for father figures is rooted in the acknowledgement of the authoritarianism that manifested itself not only in smaller social units like families but also how the nation was imagined and projected as *Vaterland*.

Jäcki dachte, wie schwer est is, einen Vater zu bekommen, der einem etwas beibringt, der einen nicht kastrieren ließe und nicht in der Glocke kaputthaute, der nicht verlangt, daß man ihm die Uhr aufzieht und der nicht Sturmführer in der Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler war.  
 Später wollte Jäcki keinen mehr. (246)

Fichte thus connects the authoritarianism displayed within the family with the broader one reflected in the fascist state by juxtaposing the two levels together – of family and nation, of father and Führer: “Wie ist Vatersein? Wie der Sturmführer sein?” (245). At the same time, the connection between indoctrination and domination is also evoked linguistically through word-plays like “Lehrherr”, which he uses in reference to his National-socialist teacher (245). His avoidance of an explanatory narrative in favor of fragments of conversations, descriptions, etc. also has the effect of opening out the theme more. Instead of spelling out the connections, they are instead laid out for the reader to connect by juxtaposing different segments together.

These multiple layers are also evident in other sections, one of which is titled “Synoptische Splitter.” In this section, Fichte presents a constellation of memories belonging to various figures that have appeared in the context of his Palette visits earlier in the book. Personal and political histories intersect in this section too, as do the kind of materials used, and these range from fragments of personal reflections and interviews to those of concentration camp songs and legal documents from the National-socialist period. For instance, references to Jäckis’s birth and a fellow Palettianer, who is called Dagmar Drewes in the book, are interrupted by fragments of the Peat Bog Soldiers song (Moorsoldatenlied), a protest song composed by political prisoners in the concentration camps near Börgermoor in Elmsland (Lower Saxony) around 1933.

Jäckis Oma verzeiht ihrer Tochter auch. Sie ist glücklich, daß es ein Junge ist und daß Sie Jäckis einzige Oma ist.

Wohin auch das Auge blicket  
Moor und Heide nur ringsum.  
Vogelsang uns nicht erquicket  
Eichen stehen kahl und krumm.  
Wir sind die Moorsoldaten  
Und ziehen mit dem Spaten

Ins Moor...

Eineinhalb Jahre nachdem Jäcki von einer unehelichen Mutter als Sohn eines Juden geboren wurde, wird Dankwart Drewes in Hamburg von einer unehelichen Mutter als Sohn eines Juden geboren.

Morgens ziehen die Kolonnen  
Durch das Moor zur Arbeit hin,  
Graben bei dem Brand der Sonnen  
Doch zur Heimat steht der Sinn. (305)

The grandmother's happiness is set up parallel with the bleakness of the National-socialist period, but instead of a descriptive overview or a distanced reference to the period, Fichte evokes the subjective point of view of the political prisoners. At the same time, however, the uniqueness or exceptionality of Jäcki's situation is also underplayed by choosing a song that was written and sung collectively,<sup>159</sup> as well as by referring to other "Mischlinge" who were born in similar circumstances. This section also contains a fragment of the title page of a commentary on the Nuremberg laws authored by Wilhelm Stuckart and Hans Globke, who served in the National Socialist Interior Ministry as leading legal experts. Their commentary *Kommentare zur deutschen Rassengesetzgebung* was a representative of the scientific/academic anti-Semitism prevalent at the time. Fichte's insertion of this fragment in a book that chronicles Hamburg underground during the Adenauer era brings the present Germany of the time sharply into focus with all its continuing entanglements with its Nazi past. Although Stuckart was later tried for war crimes, Hans Globke, after serving in the Nazi Interior Ministry, went on to become a leading political advisor to Chancellor Adenauer in the 1950s and 60s and was director of the Federal Chancellery (Bundeskanzleramt). It was in these same two decades that he

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<sup>159</sup> The Moorsoldatenlied is commonly contributed to the political prisoners and other members (including Johann Esser and Wolfgang Langhoff) of the Solinger Arbeitergesangsvereins at the concentration camp near Börgermoor. More details about the origin of the song have been provided in Langhoff's memoirs. Wolfgang Langhoff. *Die Moorsoldaten. 13 Monate Konzentrationslager. Unpolitischer Tatsachenbericht*. 1935, 1995.

was also conferred state awards. Austria honored him in 1956 with The Decoration of Honour for Services to the Republic of Austria (Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich) and Germany in 1963 with the Grand Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Großes Verdienstkreuz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland).<sup>160</sup> The fragments referring to the Nazi past, therefore, not only describe the socio-political conditions in Germany around the time Fichte was born but are carefully chosen to also illustrate the contemporary political atmosphere in Germany at the time that he was researching and writing about Palette. In this sense, the past is not something to be overcome (bewältigen)<sup>161</sup>, but rather, as intertwined in a manner that calls for a continued confrontation and negotiation with it in the present.

It is, however, not only the past and current socio-political context of Germany that is evoked while describing the childhood and war experiences of other Palettianer and their families.

Dankwart Drewes weiß nicht, daß er Halbjude ist.  
 Jäcki weiß jetzt, daß er Halbjude ist.  
 Die beiden Mütter bringen beide in der HJ unter. Dankwart und Jäcki gehen zu den letzten JH-Appellen. Sie sollen kochendes Wasser auf die Tommies gießen. Cartacalo/la tanzt für Prof. Romans Varieteschau in Salzburg den Spanischen Tanz.

Es hat kein Zweck,  
 Die HJ muß weg,  
 Die Louis müssen her,  
 Das wirkt viel mehr.

Back in April Nagasaki was all flowers  
 August in Nagasaki there'll be flame showers. (Palette 308-9)

<sup>160</sup> Revealed in a parliamentary query, whose official document is available on the Austrian parliament website: [http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXIV/AB/AB\\_10542/imfname\\_251156.pdf](http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXIV/AB/AB_10542/imfname_251156.pdf), p.26. Retrieved on February 4, 2013. For more on the German state honor, see the article by Solveig Grothe titled "60 Jahre Bundesverdienstkreuz. Die Blechlawine" in: *Der Spiegel*: <http://www.spiegel.de/einestages/60-jahre-bundesverdienstkreuz-a-947304.html>. Retrieved on February 4, 2013.

<sup>161</sup> In postwar Germany, the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was popularly used to refer to "overcoming the past" of National-socialism. However, since it connoted completion of a past and denied its continued presence, the term *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* ("working through the past"), suggested by Theodor Adorno, is preferred by scholars.

This excerpt is highly illustrative of how the incorporation of fragments generates an indeterminacy that opens up the theme rather than reducing it to a single narrative. At the same time, his sensitivity to historical embeddedness ensures that this indeterminacy doesn't fall into relativistic arbitrariness, but, rather, links together images from varying contexts. For instance, along with references to Jäcki's and Dankwart's childhood during the Nazi period and their mothers' attempts to help them survive it, Fichte also draws in 1940s anti-National-socialist Swing culture that existed in Germany's urban youth at the time, especially in Hamburg, Berlin, and Frankfurt. Caroline Boller emphasizes in her discussion of this trend that, although influenced by Jazz and Anglo-American youth trends, they were derisively referred to by the Nazis as "Tango-Jünglinge" and seen as a threat to traditional German values (2).<sup>162</sup> The Swing-Jugend, as they later came to be called, protested in turn by coming up with numerous rhymes and songs that mocked the Nazis and the Hitler-Jugend. It is one of those versions ("Die HJ muss weg") that is listed here, but with reference to the Hamburg subculture of Reeperbahn in Sankt Pauli.<sup>163</sup> The juxtaposition of the repressive conditions, the protest culture of the time, and references to the childhood experiences of Jäcki's friends are, however, abruptly cut short by two lines that are deliberately left to gape through these "synoptic splitters" without being assimilated or settled smoothly into the rest of the narrative. The two lines refer to an English translation of Japanese verses, which were dropped as leaflets over Nagasaki's civilian population by American planes just a few months before they received the atomic bomb from the same planes.

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<sup>162</sup> Caroline Boller discusses this trend in her book *Der Protest der Hamburger Swing-Jugend im Dritten Reich*, 2008.

<sup>163</sup> In German slang, Louis refers to a *Zuhälter* or pimp.

In his book *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg talks about the notion of competitive memory as opposed to multidirectional memory. Instead of looking at the Holocaust as a unique rupture in history and therefore within a framework of competing memories, he privileges a perspective that pays attention to how different traumatic histories provide a way to articulate each other.<sup>164</sup>

[...] the conceptual framework through which commentators and ordinary citizens have addressed the relationship between memory, identity, and violence is flawed. Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory – as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources – I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative. (3)

The excerpt cited above from *Die Palette* juxtaposes the two historical traumas. The trauma of being a half-Jew in Hamburg in the Nazi period is presented side by side with that of being a Japanese citizen living in Nagasaki of the 1940s.<sup>165</sup> The lack of commentary or the attempt to assimilate them within a closed narrative engenders a disruption heightened by the indeterminacy of the text, which Fichte uses to highlight the connections between the two traumas without subsuming one under the other.

What Fichte seems to be stressing here, as well as in other works, is the relationality of memory, of spaces, of events, of subjectivity, of time. This can be seen in not only in how *Palette* is presented as a relational (rather than an essential) space, as well as in the way he interweaves his autobiographical experiences with his ethnographic observations and with the subjective experiences of the figures whose lives he attempts to chronicle in their intersections within the Hamburg subcultures of the sixties. But the

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<sup>164</sup> Michael Rothberg. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, 2009.

<sup>165</sup> In his previous autobiographical novels, Fichte also describes another trauma: that of his childhood experiences during Allied air raids on Hamburg during the Second World War, which was a theme rarely articulated in postwar German literature, a silence that was later analyzed by WG Sebald in his work *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, 2001.

theme of relationality is perhaps most acutely evident in Fichte's articulations about time in this work.

### **Section III. *Petersilie* (1980)**

Fichte's 1980 work *Petersilie* is an account of his travels with his Leonore Mau, to Santo Domingo, Venezuela, Miami, and Grenada. Both were especially interested in the syncretic religious traditions of these places. Although it can be described as an ethnographic account or a travelogue, Fichte's work pushes the boundaries of both genres, even as it questions the distinction between documentary and fiction, between science and *Poesie*.

A few years before the publication of *Petersilie*, Fichte touched upon this theme in a speech given to the Frobenius Society in Frankfurt in January 1977 published under the title *Ketzerische Bemerkungen für eine neue Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (1976):

Anthropologie, Ethnologie, Ethologie, und die ihnen verwandten Wissenschaften behandeln, unterschiedlich, Verhaltensweisen des Menschen. Unter „Logos“ versteht man vor allem „Das Wort“. Worte sind Verhaltensweisen. Schon hier gibt sich eine Antinomie: Der Typus der Beschreibung und der Typus des Beschriebenen gehen unkritisch ineinander auf. Antinomien können nur poetisch ausgedrückt werden. (359)

Fichte highlights here the ignored center of these sciences, the center that forms their very basis – language. If words are modes of behavior (“Worte sind Verhaltensweisen”), and it is the latter that the anthropological sciences aim to study, then there is a contradiction in the aim of research and the means used to communicate this research. He therefore criticizes the lack of self-reflexivity in the language used by these sciences to convey their ideas. By referring to how the description and the described uncritically



merge in each other, Fichte points to the inherent limitation of scientific language here, which chooses to engage with difference but refuses to be contaminated by it.

If words are modes of behavior, then they too need to be investigated and reflected upon, rather than being transparently used to describe “other” modes of behavior. But if our means of describing the world itself colors our perception of the other, then what is the way out? According to Fichte, such an antinomy can only be expressed poetically. In *Petersilie*, Fichte works out these insights through a series of aesthetic techniques that he uses to report his travel experiences and his observations about various religious traditions that thrive there. Here, I will focus on three of these strategies – those related to authorial voice, form, and the opacity of language.

### **1. Ich bin die mir am besten bekannte Versuchsperson**<sup>166</sup>

*Petersilie* differs from most travelogues and ethnographic accounts, and one of its most striking features is the conscious underplaying of the narrator’s voice. Although the author is, of course, conspicuously present in the translation of quotes and the selection and positioning of the diverse fragments that constitute the work, his voice is largely absent in the form of a narrator who provides insights to connect these fragments together and present us an overview as readers. Fichte and Mau travelled to Santo Domingo, Venezuela, Miami, and Grenada to study the syncretism of local religions there, but we are neither presented with a detailed account of the narrator’s views and experiences in a foreign land (as one would expect in some travelogues), nor do we get a seemingly objective overview of Afro-American religious ceremonies in these regions (as one

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<sup>166</sup> VP (175)

would expect from an ethnographic account). Fichte instead remains a “lyrischer Reporter”, as he described himself in an interview.<sup>167</sup>

The book begins with a quote by a Dominican man who describes the Easter festivities in San Pedro, (a city close to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic). The rest of the work is also largely dominated by quotes from conversations with locals from varying backgrounds. The only aspect that sets them apart from the narrator’s own voice is that these quotes begin with a hyphen. In the case of extended interviews, however, even this hyphen doesn’t remain an indicator of other voices, because it is also used to mark the interviewer’s (i.e. Fichte’s) own questions. Moreover, there are very few detailed descriptions in *Petersilie*. When we do encounter descriptions, they are often staccato-like individual words, phrases, or (even more rarely) short sentences, which are frequently presented in the form of a list. For instance, Fichte witnesses voodoo ceremonies and trances as part of the initiation ceremony of three people belonging to a local cult he is researching. Freddy, one of the priests of the Maria Lionza cult, leads the ceremony as Fichte is asked to watch from the side and to write everything down. “José bietet mir eine Zigarre an. Ich bleibe am Eingang stehen. Ich solle alles genau aufschreiben.” (Petersilie 100). This is the description we get:

Kerzen.  
Rum.  
Rauchen.  
Einer schmatzt.  
Alle heben die Hände vor dem dritten Eingeweihten in die Höhe.  
Der zweite Eingeweihte betet und spuckt.  
Freddy betet.  
Spuckt.  
Freddy sieht in die Höhe.

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<sup>167</sup> Fichte’s self-description is quoted by Heinritz in his essay on polyphony in the works of Hubert Fichte and Alexander von Humboldt. Reinhard Heinritz. “‘Mehrstimmigkeit’ als transkulturelle Erzählform? Zu Reiseberichten Alexander von Humboldts und Hubert Fichtes.” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, 2003.

Alle Hände richten sich auf Freddy.  
Freddy erwacht. (101)

Later on, this description too merges with quotes by the other people participating in the ceremony. There is a moment during this scene, where, unlike in the rest of the account, we encounter the narrator posing a question about the nature of trance. This happens when he is asked to participate in the ritual which he has been describing through others' quotes and his own brief/fragment-like observations so far, but without presenting any authoritative conclusion.

Freddy steckt sich die Stecknadeln eben rein, nimmt meinen Arm, drückt damit die Stecknadeln rein, bis ich den Widerstand an seinen Knochen fühle.  
Mir wird heiss und schwarz.  
Ich gehe auf den Hof.  
Ich meine, wenn jetzt die Trance käme, würde ich weniger schwitzen.  
Ist die Trance ein Mittel gegen diese fürchterliche Übelkeit?  
Ich werde wieder reingerufen. (104)

This time, however, it is followed by a statement that reads like a conclusion. "Trance ist also eine Reaktion – wie Fieber." ("So trance is a reaction – like fever.") Even though we have a conclusive authorial voice here, it merges with the experiences described before and after by other participants of similar ceremonies. For example, directly after the moment described earlier, we are told: "

Er [Freddy] sticht mir mit einer Nadel in die Brust.  
– Die kommt von selbst wieder raus.  
Sie kommt in einer halben Stunde von selbst wieder raus" (104).

Though Freddy's words ("– Die kommt von selbst wieder raus") are marked by a hyphen, we witness Fichte's and Freddy's words merging together here as echoes ("Sie kommt in einer halben Stunde von selbst wieder raus."). In fact, it becomes even difficult to ascertain if these words are ascribed to two different people or just one person impersonating the other in a trance-induced state. Moreover, since by now the reader is

used to the constant changing of voices and figures, the narrator's voice does not evoke more authority than that of the others we encounter. By making citations the norm in this work, Fichte manages to present his own observations as simply one more account, instead of the conclusive one.

Although Fichte's main interest is in researching the Afro-American religions, he does not use the narrator to synthesize his findings, encounters and experiences. As mentioned earlier, the form of the text places different articulations on the same level, since they all consistently occur as fragments. This process not only puts the observations of the narrator on par with those of the other figures, but it also places the seemingly inconsequent, random details on the same level as the conversations about local religious practices.

Carlos Canet kommt mit seiner Lucumi<sup>168</sup>-Kirche voran. [...]

Carlos Canet sagt:

Wenn hier einer irgendwelche psychischen Störungen hat, sagt die Familie: In dir steckt ein Toter oder ein Haitianer und die wollen arbeiten, solange, bis er es selbst glaubt und da ich die Therapie auf derselben Ebene durchführe, heile ich ihn.

Ich habe im Jackson Hospital darüber gesprochen, aber die Psychiater und die Psychologen waren nicht sehr daran interessiert. Ich glaube, die Anthropologen in Amerika verstehen mehr von der Psyche als die Psychologen. [...]

- Die Yoruba in Nigeria sind raffinierter. Sie stellen die Toten in den Kostümen der Egungun<sup>169</sup> dar. Die Priester sagen zu den Novizen: Ihr *stellt* jetzt die Toten *dar*.

- Ich werde in meinem neuen Tempel nur noch Babalawos einweihen. Die Einweihung in Nigeria ist im wesentlichen die Überwindung des Totes. Ich kann heute nicht mehr durch einen Autounfall ums Leben kommen oder bei einem Flugzeugunglück.

Die Einweihung zum Babalawo in Nigeria ist ein Drama. Der Novize ist wie ein Schauspieler, den man durch ein Theaterstück führt, in dem die einzelnen Todesarten dargestellt werden. (219-21)

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<sup>168</sup> Santerian liturgical language.

<sup>169</sup> Masked, costumed figure in Yoruba rituals.

The local Santeria priest provides insights about the performative significance of alternative healing practices of various religious cults in Miami, Cuba, and Nigeria. However, despite this being one of the main research interests of both Fichte and Leonore Mau, no conclusions or observations are drawn here by the author to provide his judgment on them. There is, of course, already a judgment reflected in the inclusion of this interview excerpt, but this excerpt exists side by side with other excerpts about religious practices that do not provide explanations, only details and that are also dismissive of Canet. For instance, Ernesto, another priest, claims a few pages later: “Ich glaube, Canet erzählt nur, was er im Kino gesehen hat”(225). There is thus no attempt to provide coherence, nor to do away with contradictions in order to smoothen the narratives. The contradictions are, in fact, laid bare. “Widersprüche, Lügen, das Unechte, die Übertreibung stehen lassen, nicht wegkitten – Zweifel, Niederlagen” (KB 364).

As the words of the “ethnographer” and the “ethnographic subject” become mirrored in each other, Fichte also renders visible the inherent ambivalence of this technique. Because on the one hand it is a reminder of a non-essentialist understanding of the self, while on the other hand, it also borders on the co-opting of the other’s voice. However, Fichte does not purport to represent or describe the authentic other’s voices. His notion of travel and writing is one that helps with the “Auseinanderfallen des Bildes, das mich ausmacht” (VP 19). And in his aesthetic strategies he seems to be more invested in questioning the notions of authenticity and essentialism that usually inform writings claiming to represent the other. As he expresses it in his work *Explosion*:

Es gibt nur eine Forschung.  
 Ich selbst.  
 Oder: Mich Selbst. (560)

## 2. Die Collage: Die moderne Litanei

As mentioned earlier, the fragment and the collage play a central role in the way Fichte questions the notions of essentialism and authenticity on the one hand, and notions, such as those of space, identity, time, have been understood in traditional functionalist ethnographic works as enclosed systems. Fichte employs various aesthetic strategies in order to question this privileging of totality, especially in anthropology.

Das Fragment:

Warum müssen wissenschaftliche Erzeugnisse vollständiger sein als Ihr Vorwurf? Freräume, Fehler, Lücken, stellen die Frage nach Freiheit und Veränderung auf formale Art neu.

Die Collage:

Die moderne Litanei! [...]

Warum verleugnet der Ethnologe seine ästhetische Möglichkeiten? (KB 364)

Fichte names the interview and the feature as two genres that already incorporate poetic possibilities. *Petersilie* too is composed of Fichte's interviews with priests of various sects and the locals he encounters (e.g. taxi drivers, the wife of an arms dealer, homosexual sex-workers, priests), as well as of snippets from global and local newspapers, and his own observations. These are arranged together as fragments, whereby frequent quotes from conversations with locals are interspersed with interviews, excerpts from newspaper headlines, and even lists from the local telephone directory. Thus, in the section on Miami, between two brief paragraphs about Jean, (a homosexual man from Haiti who married an older Hawaiian woman to emigrate to Miami) and Hotel Fontainebleu (which offers two golf-courses and a free limousine ride to them), Fichte inserts an overview of listings found in the local telephone directory.

Greater Miami, Telefonbuch Gelbe Seiten 1976-77, Rund 1900 Seiten.  
Abdominal Supports, Abstractors, 30 Seiten Air Conditioning, Ambulance,  
Ammunition, Amusement, 46 Seiten Attorneys, 90 Seiten Automobiles, 9 Seiten  
Churches, 10 Seiten Draperies, 9 Seiten Funeral, 30 Seiten Furniture,

5 Seiten Guards, 2 Seiten Gems, 6 Seiten Hospitals, 8 Seiten Hotels, 30 Seiten Insurance, 6 Seiten Landscape, 16 Seiten Moving, 10 Seiten Nursery, Nurses, Nurserymen, 2 Seiten Oxygen, 7 Seiten Pest, 50 Seiten Physicians – Ärzte, Davon zweieinhalb Seiten Psychiatrists, Psychologues etc., 25 Seiten Real Estate – Grundstücke, 31 Seiten Restaurants, 21 Seiten Television, 1 Seite Wigs – Perrücken. (161)

Though the directory listing in itself is clearly an interesting document that reveals something about the local culture, at first glance, the *order* of these passages might seem random, especially since the author doesn't clearly enunciate any relation between them. But on a closer look, the first passage begins to connect to the previous fragments, such as the one about the homeless woman brought to the Poliklinik in Mount Sinai (159), or the one noting the dominance of cars over people in the city: "Kein Mensch auf der Strasse. Nur die grossen Wagen" (154). As we ponder the high number of pages devoted to Attorneys, Automobiles and Air-conditioners, this list is followed on the next page by another list from the telephone directory, with names of the various Churches in the area. "Greater Miami. Telefonbuch 1976-77. Gelbe Seiten. Churches. African Methodist Episcopal. Baha'i Assembly of North Dade. Baptist Churches. Catholic Churches. Christian Sciences. Church of Christ. Eastern Orthodox" and so on (162). Again, the positioning of this second list might seem abrupt at first glance, but soon connections begin to emerge, for instance, with passage that directly follows, about M. – a "Wahrsagerpriester" – who claims to have founded the first Lucumi church in the world in Miami (a church that is not listed in the directory), and who gives religious advice from his office (a part of the Law Offices in the area), where he greets Fichte with: "Let's talk business" (162).

*Petersilie* is thus constructed in a way which forces readers to make their own connections between the various fragments instead of being provided with a linear

narrative that explains what is compiled and presented. The experimentation in form allows the representation of these places to be open and inclusive, but it also reveals the limitation of the process, because the selection and positioning of quotations still rests upon a single author (e.g., the choice of the directory listing also steers the readers to make conclusions that Europeans would normally expect from Americans<sup>170</sup>). Moreover, the locals whom Fichte interviews also remain hidden behind anonymous initials, rather than, for instance, being co-authors of the work. However, the decision to present the various subjectivities not as separately identifiable but as intermixed (and, as has been shown above, at times inseparable from the narrator's voice) is related to the relationality Fichte wants to underscore, an aspect discussed later in this chapter.

Another example of how multiple levels are opened up by Fichte's use of fragments and collage form is the following excerpt from the section on Grenada, which constitutes the last section in the book. Fichte presents snippets of conversations along with excerpts from news on the local radio, as well as descriptions of individual moments from his experiences in Grenada in 1979, a time of intense political and social changes, of coups and revolutions, situated a few years after Grenada gained independence from England and a few years before the U.S. invasion of 1983. Although this part too contains no overarching narrative, the inclusion of a variety of fragments manages to provide a dense view of the times without reducing them to one or the other thesis. In just over three pages, for instance, we are presented multiple intersections.

Freitag, den 13. April:  
Radio Free Grenada.  
Maurice Bishop über den Besuch des US-Botschafters Frank Ortiz.

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<sup>170</sup> For instance, Europeans' expectation of the importance for Americans of air conditioning, television, mobility, or therapists through the selection presented in this excerpt also underscores a cultural stereotype.



- Ortiz sagte: Die USA sind das reichste, freieste und grosszügigste Land der Welt. Aber die USA haben auch eine andre Seite.
  - Die USA würden jede Verbindung zwischen Grenada und Kuba mit grossem Missfallen sehen.
  - Der Tourismus könnte leicht geschockt werden.
  - Ortiz sprach von der „panischen“ Reaktion auf das Flugzeug eines Fotografen, das angeschossen worden ist.
  - Ortiz riet, nicht weiter von „Invasionen durch Phantom-Söldner“ zu sprechen. Sonst würde Grenada alle seine Touristen verlieren.
- Maurice Bishop erklärt, daß der Tourismus auf Jamaica durch Falschmeldungen beschädigt worden ist.
- Maurice Bishop:
- Wir werden uns nicht erpressen lassen. (314)

This section later also includes an interview with Maurice Bishop which discusses the role of Germany backed Radio Antillese, which silenced popular oppositional views in favor of state sponsored ones (351). Details of the political situation are interspersed with references to religious rituals and groups. For instance, the fragment right before the one cited above refers to the Muslims in Grenada and the invitation Leonore Mau, Fichte's photographer partner, receives, while the fragment after it mentions South Asian migrants working as coolies in Grenada.

Die Suniten, die sich auf Grenada "Sunny"-Moslems, laden Leonore zum Gebet am Karfreitag ein.  
 Über den Feuerwehrgarage, in dem orangegetünchten Haus.  
 19 sind gekommen.  
 Sie beten auf arabisch.  
 - Photographieren hat der Prophet nicht erlaubt.  
 - Als der Prophet lebte, gab es noch keine Kameras, sagte Leonore.  
 [...]  
 Ohne ein Wort und ohne veränderte Miene wartet Leroy auf die Polizei.  
 Der Inder ist aufgeregt.  
 Leroy schildert den Unfall in der Garage.  
 Er sagt von dem Inder: The coolie.  
 - Bist du versichert? (314-315)

On the surface, the non-linear juxtaposition of these fragments from differing contexts seems arbitrary. For instance, references to everyday life include details of how

the supermarkets only seem to carry imported goods instead of fresh vegetables and fruits (290), followed by seemingly random snippets of details about violence of Eric Gairy's administration, interspersed with short descriptions of scenes at the beach, of overheard conversations about revolutionaries opposing Gairy, followed by another remark about food, a local person's mentioning the decrease in the price of rice since the revolution (312). Fichte's interest in the syncretism of Afro-Caribbean religions is also one of the thematic foci and frequently appears in the book; a number of religious ceremonies, trance rituals, and meetings with practitioners of various religious traditions and cults are described in this section too. The descriptions are short and often interspersed with comments by others, such as the following one made by Fichte's local driver about the Xango priestess Mother Maudge.

Sie lassen uns durch. Oben am Vulkansee auch.  
 - Mother Maudge ist für die Revolution, sagt Leroy.  
 - Sie ist keine Revolutionärin. Aber sie ist für die Revolution. (324)

Upon a closer look, however, one notices how the indeterminacy that is engendered by this fragmentary back and forth forces one to not only read differently but also understand differently. For instance, although researching religious syncretism is Fichte's main interest in the region (as is evident from the subtitle of this book),<sup>171</sup> Fichte doesn't present the diverse religious traditions in a coherent narrative that attempts to provide a comprehensive overview. Neither does he generalize their presence as essential to the Grenadian identity. In fact, as is already evident from the excerpts above, there is no overarching Grenadian identity that is projected in this section. Instead, we get a kaleidoscopic view of the everyday life in Grenada at the time. However, the aesthetic

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<sup>171</sup> The subtitle of the book is: *Die afroamerikanischen Religionen. Santo-Domingo. Venezuela. Miami. Grenada.*

presentation of the details that provide us these kaleidoscopic details, simultaneously underscores indeterminacy, thus actively resisting assimilation into a grand narrative. The point of this fragmentation is, again, to highlight relationality over essentiality, an aspect that is also evident in the excerpt above in the intersection of the political and the religious, of the tourist with the coolie, of the revolutionary and the dictatorial, of American foreign policy and indigenous rituals.

### 3. Worte sind Verhaltensweisen <sup>172</sup>

As has been mentioned previously, another manner in which Fichte challenges the notions of authenticity and essentialism that inform traditional travel writings and ethnographies is by turning the focus on language itself. In doing so, he also critiques the dismissal of the role of language in a scientific discourse that claims epistemological rigor.

Die Sprache des wissenschaftlichen Weltbilds hat sich die Welt ähnlich gemacht, und die Verkrüppelungen in dieser Sprache sind mit verantwortlich für die Verkrüppelungen in unserer Welt.  
Regressionen der Sprache sind nicht nur verantwortlich für Verhaltensstörungen – sie rufen neue Verhaltensstörungen hervor. (KB 361)

Fichte highlights everyday language and notions in a way that interrupts the smooth working of language as a transparent medium. For instance, the section on Miami in *Petersilie* begins with repetitive sentences that force the reader to pay attention to a concept that has defined America's image as a place of refuge

Ich bin Jude und suche die Freiheit in Miami.  
Ich bin KZ-Wärter und suche die Freiheit in Miami.  
Ich bin Gegner von Duvalier und suche die Freiheit in Miami.  
Ich bin der haitianischer Innenminister und suche die Freiheit in Miami. [...]  
Ich bin Kubanerin und hasse die Schwulen und suche die Freiheit in Miami.  
Ich bin ein deutscher Waffenhandler aus Caracas und suche die Freiheit in Miami.  
Ich bin ein deutscher Zeitungsverleger und suche die Freiheit in Miami.

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<sup>172</sup> *Petersilie* (359)

Ich bin ein Mafia-Boss und suche die Freiheit in Miami. (153)

Not only is the image of freedom presented with its contradictions here, but through interviews with activists and politicians, listing historical facts, as well as observations of locals and snippets of news items, this work also investigates the specific events where successive American governments have misused the notion of freedom as a justification of supporting dictators and coups or declaring wars, for instance, in Dominican Republic and Grenada.

However, it is not only resonant concepts this work forces us to pay attention to, but also seemingly benign everyday language. For instance, along with excerpts of conversations and images of life in Miami, we abruptly encounter a list of common English language niceties one might be accustomed to (in America). These phrases are vertically arranged as a list or a litany.

How are you this morning?  
 How do you feel today?  
 I would be happy to.  
 Sure!  
 Is everything alright?  
 I hope to see you again.  
 Sorry, we are closed.  
 Yes, we are open!  
 Thank you so much for coming.  
 Enjoy your meal.  
 Have a nice evening.  
 The pleasure was mine.  
 Great!  
 Gorgeous!  
 Take care of yourself.  
 You are welcome.  
 Nice to meet you.  
 We shall miss you.  
 Thank you.  
 Be good! (160)

The presentation of these phrases, devoid of a context, or even a commentary, makes them opaque and defamiliarizes them, thus forcing us to pay attention to them. Fichte uses this focus to enable more self-reflexivity about one's own language, even as his strategy of repetition serves to reveal other aspects. For instance, he highlights the economic context of the places he visits, not only in terms of national economic policies but also their manifestation in the everyday lives of people. He does this, among other ways, by inserting quotes of locals about how much a taxi driver earns or how many hours they need to work in order to make ends meet. One such instance is presented through an excerpt from the Miami Herald and its advertisement pullout –

“Sonderbeilage Fresseanzeigen”:

Sonderbeilage Fresseanzeigen 28 Seiten:  
 Wir sparen Ihr Geld.  
 Sparen Sie 15 cents bei drei Rollen.  
 Sie sparen 2 Dollar 13 cents.  
 Sie sparen 15 cents.  
 7 cents weniger.  
 Sie sparen 10 cents.  
 25 cents weniger.  
 Sie sparen bis zu 2 Dollar 50.  
 Sie sparen 25 cents.  
 Sie sparen 15 cents.  
 Überraschung: Sie sparen 15 cents.  
 Sie sparen 50 cents.  
 10 cents weniger.  
 Sie sparen 10 cents.  
 Sie sparen 12 cents.  
 Sie sparen 12 cents, 12 cents, 12 cents, 12 cents, 12 cents. (163)

Through repetition, Fichte thus defamiliarizes the everyday advertising language we encounter so often that it becomes “normal” and invisible. Yet, at the same time, he also presents a perspective of the economically disempowered, of someone for whom saving 12 cents would matter. In doing so, he reveals how everyday life in Miami is embedded

in an aggressive consumerist economy. The repetition, therefore, is not only an act of defamiliarization but also of underscoring the aggressiveness of consumer culture. And in encountering this excerpt in a language other than American English, it also forces one to reassess one's own everyday context and the role of language in determining our "Verhaltensweisen" or modes of behavior. As Fichte sums it up in his "Ketzerische Bemerkungen": "Worte sind Verhaltensweisen" (KB 359).

#### **Section IV. Beyond the Self and the Other: the Relational**

From Hartmut Böhme's comprehensive work on Fichte's oeuvre<sup>173</sup> to more recent studies examining the epistemological significance of travel in his writing and the concept of *ethnopoésie*,<sup>174</sup> a persistent understanding of the import of Fichte's autobiographical and ethnographic works has been his interrogation of inter-relationality of the self and the other. Although Fichte's non-essentialist understanding of the self, as well as the role that writing plays in this unending excavational search for the layers that compose the self has been well-acknowledged, one needs to go beyond this understanding of the self and the other, even though it is ultimately invested in the deconstruction of this binary. This is because the inter-relationality of the self and the other does not adequately capture the scope of what Fichte attempts in his writings. Doreen Massey's work on theorizing space and place provides a helpful way to think about Fichte's work in this regard. In her book *Space, Place and Gender*,<sup>175</sup> she discusses the idea of space as enclosed or as influenced by the relation to the other.

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<sup>173</sup> Hartmut Böhme. *Hubert Fichte. Riten des Autors und Leben der Literatur*, 1992.

<sup>174</sup> Peter Braun and Manfred Weinberg. *Ethno/Graphie. Reiseformen des Wissens*, 2002. Christoph Schmitt-Maaß. *Das gefährdete Subjekt Selbst- und Fremdforschung in gegenwärtiger Ethnopoésie*, 2011. Jan-Frederik Bandel. *Nachwörter. Zum poetischen Verfahren Hubert Fichtes*, 2008.

<sup>175</sup> Doreen Massey. *Space, Place and Gender*, 1994.

While it is frequently accepted that identities are relational, the possibilities are often closed down by the assumption that such relations must be those of bounded, negative counterposition, of inclusion and exclusion. Yet, as has been seen, it has in principle always been difficult, and has over the centuries become even more so, to distinguish the inside of a place from the outside. Indeed it is precisely in part the presence of the outside within which helps to construct the specificity of the local place. (169)

Massey distinguishes between an understanding of the inter-relationality of the self and the other, and a more dynamic conception of the space as a process, rather than an enclosed space with a clear inside and outside that mutually determine each other. In this sense, space is always already relational. The numerous connections highlighted by the variety of fragments that compose Fichte's two novels discussed here point to this understanding of space as well.

Ich sitze in Sesimbra auf den spitzen Felsen.  
 Ich beobachte, was auf den Strand gespült wird.  
 Ich denke – während ein einzelner Fischer im Ruderboot mit gleichmäßigen  
 Schlägen parallel zur Strandlinie entlangtreibt – an die Palette, sehe die Palette in  
 Beziehung zu den Fischern am Strand.  
 Es ergeben sich Überschneidungen. [...]  
 Mit vier Jahren überquerte Jäcki den Gänsemarkt zum ersten Mal in der  
 Straßenbahn. [...]  
 Es gab die Lessingstatue nicht mehr. [...]  
 Mit elf Jahren geht Jäcki über den Gänsemarkt; wegen Stromsperre verkehrten  
 keine Straßenbahnen. Er glitschte über die zugefrorene Alster. Er kam aus der  
 Oberschule Niendorf.  
 Mit zwölf fuhr Jäcki jeden Tag über den Gänsemarkt – wenn er nicht am  
 Stephanplatz umstieg und über die Lombardsbrücke abkürzte. (Palette 10)

As he mentions Hamburg in the first section, Fichte describes the specific places in relation to Jäcki's changing age. Place is thus understood in its intersections with time and with other spaces (for instance, Sesimbra). Massey also refers to this intersectionality.

Rather, the point is that space and time are inextricably interwoven. It is not that we cannot make any distinction at all between them but that the distinction we do

make needs to hold the two in tension, and to do so within an overall, and strong, concept of four-dimensionality. (261)

Fichte extends this understanding of time as he sets up multiple notions of time parallel to each other, again through seemingly random details and snippets. To understand how Fichte stresses the relational and how it is linked with his method of frequently interrupting (or seeming to interrupt) our sense of understanding, a useful example is the beginning of the section “Synoptische Splitter”. The section begins with a reflection on time, followed by a reference to Jäckis’s grandmother’s birth, which is juxtaposed with a seemingly random fact: the publishing of the eighth volume of a general knowledge encyclopedia in Leipzig.<sup>176</sup> Both in the reference to time as well as to the two random facts (grandmother’s birth and fragment on Guano from the encyclopaedia), Fichte replaces the idea of wholeness and understanding with a text that privileges fragmentation and indeterminacy, and in doing so underscores relationality over essentiality. The same section, through subsequent fragments, also evokes various layers of time.

Die Verneinung der Zeit, zunächst vorgestellt als Zeit nach und hinter der Zeit, dann auch als Zeit vor der Zeit, als anfangs- und endlose Zeit.  
 Dann schafft Jäckis Omas lieber Gott Himmel und Erde und die Erde sieht aus wie der Zobden in der Nähe von Breslau und die Engel haben so niedliche Kniekehlen, daß Jäckis Oma ihnen hineinküssen möchte. [...] Oben in Finnland passiert zur gleichen Zeit was mit der Ente.<sup>177</sup> [...] Als Jäckis Oma in Glogau geboren wird, erscheint der achte Band einer Encyclopädie des allgemeinen Wissens in Leipzig.  
 Gottland – Holar.  
 Der werthvollste G.<sup>178</sup> findet sich auf den Chinainseln an der peruanischen Küste und bildet hier Schichten von 7-30 Meter Mächtigkeit. [...] Die untersten Schichten der Guanolager bestehen meistens aus Exkrementen und Knochen von

<sup>176</sup> Fichte seems to be referring here to *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon. Eine Encyclopädie des allgemeinen Wissens*. 8. Band. Gottland – Holar. 3. Auflage. Leipzig: Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts, 1876.

<sup>177</sup> Fichte signals to the Finnish origin myth, according to which the world was created from the fragments of an egg laid by a duck on the knee of the goddess of air, Ilmmatar.

<sup>178</sup> Fichte alludes to Guano here, a commonly used natural fertilizer found in Peru.



Seehunden, Seelöwen; auch sind im G. zahllose meerbewohnende Diatomeen etc., versteinerte Eier, Federn und in Mumien verwandelte Vögel aufgefunden worden. [...]

Als Jäckis Oma in Glogau geboren wird einverleibt sich Hamburg die Vorstadt St Pauli mit ihren Volkstheatern, Cirken, Karoussells, Thierbuden. Immer wird es Sitte, daß die Geschäftsleute außerhalb der Stadt und zwar Winter und Sommer hindurch wohnen und nur zu den Geschäftsstunden (etwa von 10-4 Uhr) in der Stadt sind,

sind die chilenischen Vorräte an natürlichem Nitrate nicht mehr erheblich genug, um im Falle eines größeren Krieges eine ausreichende Munitionsherstellung zu ermöglichen,

wird die Urgroßmutter Enochs nicht in die Kirchenbücher aufgenommen, weil sie aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach Zigeunerin ist,

züchtet Igors Urgroßvater Champignons auf der Veddel,

sind die peruanischen Guanolager erschöpft, [...] (302-304)

Beginning with a reflection on the negation of time contained in the conception of linear time as well as within the notion of theological and mythical time, Fichte presents an alternative understanding of time as relational. He does so by juxtaposing biographical time with mythical (his grandmother's birth is interspersed with a reference to the Finnish origin myth), with geological (Guano formations) as well as with administrative time (the inclusion of St Pauli into Hamburg). The reference to Guano and its diminishing reserves in Peru also bring in the destructive effects of colonial industrialized time that ultimately caused the vast Guano reserves accumulated over centuries in Peru to deplete within a span of eighty years.

As stated earlier, the strategy of superimposing various layers upon each other through fragmented references, and the resultant indeterminacy it engenders, underscores relationality over essentiality. The reference to Guano can help illustrate this further, because a closer look at the historical and colonial background of Guano trade presents a good example of how revealingly this strategy works. It manages to give a sense of the various traces and affective relations that may be contained in a time period that is

inherited by the narrator – as a grandson, but also as a political citizen of a state with a history of colonial relations, as well as an ethnographer within (and Fichte’s case, against) a tradition of scientific writing embedded in these relations. Guano was commonly used in Peru as a natural fertilizer, and it was mainly composed of excrements of sea-birds and bats, accumulated over time. Alexander von Humboldt popularized it in Europe by bringing back samples from the Peruvian coast in 1804 (he believed it to be formed over “eons of geological time”), and further scientific studies revealed it to be rich in nitrogen. This led to its high demand in Europe for agricultural uses, and it formed an important product of trade for Peru in the nineteenth century.<sup>179</sup> In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt also mentions the influence of Humboldt’s “discovery” of Guano.<sup>180</sup>

Humboldt prided himself on being the first person to bring Guano to Europe as a fertilizer, a “discovery” that eventually led to a Guano boom which by the end of the century caused a war between Peru and Chile and brought the latter’s economy in total dependence on British bankers. Of course Humboldt’s discovery depended on coastal Peruvians telling him of the substance and its fertilizing properties. Who knows what their assumptions and expectations were? The conventions of travel and exploration writing (production and reception) constitute the European subject as a self-sufficient, monadic source of knowledge. That configuration virtually guarantees that the interactional history of the representation will only turn up as traces [...]. (133)

Fichte’s strategy of privileging the fragment works to disrupt precisely this tradition of the European subject as a “self-sufficient, monadic source of knowledge” as well as to reveal and highlight simultaneity of traces that constitute lived and inherited experiences that may not yet have been fully articulated and conceptualized.

This way of understanding things in their relationality rather than through a reductive essentiality or totalizing categorization is also evident in Fichte’s grasp of the importance of poetic language to in contributing to a multidimensional understanding that

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<sup>179</sup> For more on this, see Gregory T. Cushman. *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History*, 2013.

<sup>180</sup> Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 1992, 2007.

resists a closed, totalizing view posing as science. His experimental ethnographies, consequently, are a result of an understanding of ethnographic research as one centered around linguistic correspondences instead of reified language.

Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen könnte ihre Haltung von “Die Stuyvesant-Generation geht ihren Weg” aufgeben.  
 Sie würde deutlich als ein vieldimensionales Gebilde – ein poetisches.  
 Dichterische Sprache – im Gegensatz zur taktischen in Werbung und Politik – entsteht im Augenblick der Aussage neu, zusammen mit dem Gegenstand der Aussage selbst.  
 Die Welt würde nicht länger aufgefasst als ein Supermarket, aus dem man in Halbpfundpaketen einsammelt, sie teilte sich nicht länger in Beschreiber und Beschriebene, Gebrandtmarkte.  
 Ethnologische Forschung würde ein dialektischer Vorgang, eine sprachliche Correspondance.  
 Zerrütete Persönlichkeiten laborieren in einer kaputten Welt.  
 Das ist die Situation.  
 Hangelnd.  
 Sagen Sie es aus!  
 Erbrechen Sie sich! (KB 364)

## Conclusion

The discussion of Fichte’s novels in this chapter has revolved around the use of fragmentation and the indeterminacy engendered by it which opens up multiple dimensions of time (to reveal the simultaneity of past and present) as well as space (to highlight relationality rather than a binary notion of inside-outside). However, what sets Fichte’s writings apart from his contemporaries is his idea of poetic anthropology and the transformational role that Fichte ascribes to words through his focus on the logos, in his time often ignored in social sciences like Anthropology. In fact, when Fichte claims “Worte sind Verhaltensweisen” he is pointing towards nothing less than the power of the word to form as well as to transform. While on the one hand, words can define our cultural imaginary, on the other hand, they also have the power to disrupt and transform

it. Gabriele Schwab emphasizes this potential in relation to literature and, specifically, in the context of imaginary ethnographies:<sup>181</sup>

Literature is a medium that *writes culture* within the particular space and mode of aesthetic production. It, therefore, uses discursive and figurative modes, regimes of knowledge, and structures of appeal that are specific to literature and related aesthetic practices. (2)

As she emphasizes, more importantly, literature can also “rewrite cultural narratives” and “use alternative signifying practices and bold refigurations to undo cultural iconographies and unsettle the status quo of habitual cultural codes” (2). Schwab uses Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s concept of experimental systems to examine the particularity of literary knowledge. Rheinberger, a molecular biologist and a historian of science, elaborates his notion of experimental systems thus:<sup>182</sup>

An experimental system has more stories to tell than the experimenter at a given moment is trying to tell with it. It not only contains submerged narratives, the story of its repressions and displacements; as long as it remains a research system, it also has not played out its excess. Experimental systems contain remnants of older narratives as well as fragments of narratives that have not yet been told. Grasping at the unknown is a process of tinkering; it proceeds not so much by completely doing away with old elements or introducing new ones but rather by re-moving them, by an unprecedented concatenation of the possible(s). It differs/defers. (78)

The import of Fichte’s aesthetic strategies used in these two works can be understood through Rheinberger’s notion of experimental systems, since the aesthetics of openness and fragmentation Fichte uses deliberately generates a “conceptual indeterminacy”<sup>183</sup> that is not merely based on a lack of or withholding of information. Rather, it creates a deliberate relational, non-reductive, experimental system that can lead

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<sup>181</sup> Gabriele Schwab. *Imaginary Ethnographies*, 2012.

<sup>182</sup> Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. “Experimental Systems: Historiality, Narration, and Deconstruction.” *Science in Context*. 7, I, 1994. 65-81.

<sup>183</sup> Schwab. *Imaginary Ethnographies*, 2012 (7).

to ways of articulation of what is not yet known or consciously acknowledged. Germany's relationship with its repressed National Socialist past as well as its largely unacknowledged and unexamined colonial fantasies were both being increasingly questioned and critiqued by the generation politicized through its association with the 1960s student's movement and vocal in its expression of solidarity with anti-colonial movements worldwide. In this context, Fichte's poetic anthropology is especially pertinent, since the aesthetic strategies he uses in these works help to not only interrogate habitual modes of thinking but also to provide transitional spaces or experimental systems in which new modes, which may not have been fully grasped yet, can begin to be articulated.

In both Chapter 2 as well as this one, we have seen how Ottinger and Fichte set up experimental systems through their works. In Ottinger's films, we saw how her experimental strategies can reveal submerged narratives and displace naturalized discourses and centers: paintings can lie; documentaries can be treacherous; history and anthropology can be a theatre; windows can frame not a view of the outside but a representation of it; objects can point not to factness and essence but to transformation and mutability; the very techniques used to order a chaotic outside reality can create uncertainties about the existence of that outside, of that pristine reality waiting to be discovered, understood and known; the exotic becomes mundane while the commonplace becomes strange; the normal becomes the ugly while marginalized freaks destabilize the center.

Likewise, in Fichte's texts, we saw that: language reveals its own impulse towards treason; words turn into material not mirror; information of a grandmother's birthdate

accompanies an encyclopedia entry on a Peruvian fertilizer; the mention of supermarkets' stock of imported goods rather than local produce paves the way for a fragment about a post-revolution fall in grain prices; secular money turns up as a character alongside the theatre of sacred rituals; the earnings and working hours of taxi drivers ferrying a traveler are inserted into the travelogue; the poor's need to save paltry sums of money is juxtaposed with aggressive advertising strategies; layers peel off to reveal yet other layers; a kaleidoscopic view shifts just as we think our sense of the view has begun to resemble a knowable whole.

Both Fichte and Ottinger thus create experimental systems where the existing and the striving meet to beckon *and* defer a becoming, the imprecisely and distortedly known intercalates with the as-yet-unknown, the felt heralds and evokes only vaguely understood perceptions.

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