

Fall 10-20-2011

On the difficulties of letting the other speak: The German-Polish relationship in Christoph Hochhäusler's "Milchwald".

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Recommended Citation

Polak- Springer, Katrin (2011) "On the difficulties of letting the other speak: The German-Polish relationship in Christoph Hochhäusler's "Milchwald", *EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge/vol2/iss1/2>

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Despite all efforts at European integration, the German-Polish relationship remains a deeply emotional matter. Christoph Hochhäusler's 2003 film *Milchwald* (*This Very Moment*), associated with the contemporary German film movement *Berliner Schule*, reveals that politics are intimately linked to libidinal structures, and, ultimately, to the private sphere of the family. In the film, family structures are depicted as hierarchic and counterproductive to altruistic values such as love and friendship. "Friendship,"¹ "partnership," and "good neighborhood,"² however, are the terms promoted in EU discourse when it comes to the relationship between its member states. Especially the last rounds of EU enlargement to include countries of Eastern Europe sparked image campaigns promoting these idealistic values. However, just like the bourgeois family, a concept developed in 19th century industrializing societies, the EU "family"³ is first and foremost an economic unit, and as such based on commodity exchange and the separation of the private and the public sphere.⁴ While in private, emotions and personal experiences determine the relationship between individual family members, this layer of reality is suppressed and only subcutaneously present in the public sphere.⁵

Berliner Schule is the contested title for a group of non-commercial German filmmakers, including Ulrich Köhler, Henner Winckler, Hochhäusler, Benjamin Heisenberg, Maren Ade, Maria Speth, Valeska Grisebach, and others, referred to as "Nouvelle Vague Allemande" in the French *Cahiers Du Cinéma*.⁶ The term originally referred to the Berlin DFFB (*Deutsche Film- und*

¹ The values of the EU Erasmus Student Network as stated on its homepage: "unity in diversity, diversity in the unity..., students helping students..., fun in friendship and respect..., international dimension of the life..., love for Europe as an area of peace and cultural exchange..., openness with tolerance..., cooperation in the integration" (<http://www.esn.org/content/what-esn>).

² Especially in Germany, the Europe—discourse heavily uses family –and friendship imagery. On the German language EU internet portal "Europa," links lead to the topics "Die Europäische Union-eine immer größere Familie" and "Gute Nachbarschaft" (http://europa.eu/abc/keyfigures/index_de.htm).

³ The "EU-family" is also invoked in international press releases, as this article on the EU's financial recovery strategies shows: "EU: Family Ties with rich cousin Germany turn bittersweet" (Julio Godoy. *IPS*. Feb.24, 2011: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54609>).

⁴ On the historical category of the bourgeois family, see Friedrich Engels: *Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates* (1884), Max Horkheimer: *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936), Michel Foucault: *Der Wille zum Wissen. Sexualität und Wahrheit* (1995).

⁵ On the development of the bourgeois public sphere, Jürgen Habermas' seminal volume *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) is a standard work. The suppressed emotional sphere, which is not just absent, but invisibly structuring the public as well, is dealt with in Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (1972), and *History and Obstinacy* (1981).

⁶ See for example Elisabeth Lequeret. "Allemagne: La Génération de l'Espace." *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Vol. 587 (2004): 47-51. Print.

Fernsehakademie Berlin), founded in 1966. The contemporary movement is not named after this institution, even though its original members, Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec, were graduates there in the early 1990s, taught by avant-garde and documentary filmmakers Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky.⁷ Their films are set at an almost apocalyptic end point of Enlightenment, where absolute rationality threatens to tip over into mysticism. Petzold maintains, “you have to behold the most everyday space until it looks back, until it becomes mysterious” (in Abel, “Intensifying Life” no pagination). Correspondingly, *Berliner Schule* films are associated with restricted camera movement and exceptionally long shots, which add an almost uncanny excess to reality, involving specters and aspects of a reality beneath the surface of the visible.

Milchwald itself is modeled after an old German myth, the Grimms’ fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel.” Music and lighting in this film underline a fundamental ambiguity between mass produced smooth surfaces on the one hand, and temporal depth and decay on the other. This dialectical aesthetic points to the two distinct modes of treating one’s past: one can either treat it as a natural part of the self, or blend out discomfiting aspects of history, as has been done in Germany for large parts of the 20th century.⁸ Only recently has the violent past of twentieth-century population politics become an object of public discourse. Personal traumatic experiences and their repercussions in contemporary popular consciousness remain a largely private matter that cannot be addressed in official interaction between Germany and Poland.

The relationship between Germany and its eastern Catholic neighbor is characterized by great forces of attraction and repulsion, as well as mutual projection. Both countries have a passionate relationship with their borders, which have a long history of contestation.⁹ The most sensitive aspect in this relationship represents Hitler’s destruction of the young Republic of Poland, founded after WWI. Under Nazi occupation, the city of Warsaw, including the largest Jewish ghetto in Europe, was obliterated. Thousands of Poles, the majority of them

⁷ As an introduction to the so-called *Berliner Schule*, see Marco Abel’s article in *Cinéaste*, Vol. 33, No.4, Fall (2008): “Intensifying Life: The Cinema of the ‘Berlin School’.”

⁸ *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1963) analyses the socio-psychological condition of the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s, arguing that the majority of Germans after 1945 eliminated National Socialism from their collective consciousness, which led to an almost absent reworking of the past and the perception of a “zero hour” at the end of the war. In 1986/87 the so-called “Historikerstreit” debated the status of the Holocaust as part of German historical consciousness and national identity, and the possible perception of National Socialists as victims (Ernst Nolte’s argument).

⁹ The history of the Polish-German relationship cannot be reproduced here in full. For an overview of border conflicts between both countries see “Deutschland und Polen.” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (APuZ 5-6 2005).

Jewish, were sent to work camps, and the national elite, made up of intellectuals, military, and political leaders, partially destroyed. With the German defeat at the end of the war, thousands of ethnic Germans were expelled or fled from what became Polish territory after the Potsdam treaty 1945. A significant portion of these expellees expected to eventually return to their "Heimat" east of the Oder and Neisse Rivers.¹⁰ The collapse of the Warsaw Pact at the end of the Cold War raised old anxieties along the German-Polish border. The term "frontier" became a synonym for the newly established eastern border of the European Union, which as of 1990 was the border between re-unified Germany and Poland.¹¹

Today, the Berlin Republic¹² promotes a clear break with its troubled past in post-Wall public discourse. The imperative is to become an open, mobile, and dynamic society, as promoted in Tom Tykwer's 1998 film *Lola Rennt*¹³ or in the media campaign accompanying the soccer World Cup of 2006, which praised Germany as an open, friendly, and dynamic country.¹⁴ In their daily lives, however, Germans perceive themselves to be threatened by many challenges, such as a loss of security, the deterioration of the welfare state, the disintegration of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and the long-term effects of immigration.¹⁵

¹⁰ The *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin dedicated a special exhibit to the topic of flight and expulsion in 2008: <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/wk2/kriegsverlauf/massenflucht/>. For more information on the topic, see Bernd Faulenbach: "Die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus den Gebieten jenseits von Oder und Neiße. Zur wissenschaftlichen und öffentlichen Diskussion in Deutschland." *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (B 51-52/2002).

¹¹ See, for example, the pamphlet "A Future Without Frontiers: Young People's Europe." *Office for Official Publications of the European Communities*, 1999. For more information on the Polish-German relationship since the second World War, see *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, Heft 273, Dieter Bingen; the public television project on Germans and Poles at: <http://www.deutsche-und-polen.de/index.jsp.html>

¹² The term refers to Germany after the unification of 1990, when Berlin replaced Bonn as capital.

¹³ Margit Sinka argues that the film establishes the new German capital Berlin as a dynamic, future-oriented global city, heralding in a new age, the era of the Berlin Republic.

¹⁴ The government established an official website promoting the world cup in Germany: <http://wm2006.deutschland.de/DE/Navigation/Home/home.html>

¹⁵ The decline in jobs and social security since the 1990s was frequently accredited to the financial efforts ("Solidaritätszuschlag") to re-structure and integrate the "neue Bundesländer." For more information on the socio-economic consequences of the German unification see also the website of the *Deutsches Historisches Museum*: <http://www.hdg.de/lemo/html/WegeInDieGegenwart/FolgenDerDeutschenEinheit/index.html>.

The threat of immigrant workers taking German jobs was the reason for a prolonged transitional period that kept the citizens of newly admitted eastern European member states of the EU from entering the German job market until the year 2011. See: <http://www.eu-info.de/arbeiten-europa/erweiterung/Uebergangsregelungen-EU/>. Especially during the years of stagnation and economic crisis, 2005-2010, Germans yet again saw their prosperity challenged. *Die Welt* titled in its May 4th, 2008 issue: "Der Wohlstand in Deutschland ist in Gefahr," and the *Hamburger*

The relationship between Germany and Poland today is still marked by significant asymmetries of power, which create emotional distance between the two societies.¹⁶ Polish society is strongly oriented towards its two major neighbors, Russia and Germany. Many Poles have been guest workers in Germany and thus speak the language of their western neighbor. Poland has a long tradition of democracy and multiculturalism, producing the first European constitution in 1791, declared by King Poniatowski. In 1980 the Solidarność movement triggered the democratization process in Eastern Europe and eventually helped to bring about the fall of the GDR. This accomplishment received due recognition in Horst Köhler's speech at the 25th anniversary of the movement, in Gdansk 2005,¹⁷ and recently, in an interview of the new president Christian Wulff to the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*.¹⁸ The fact that Germans could and should learn from their neighbor was furthermore pointed out in the German president's speech at the opening of the German-Polish year 2005, where Horst Köhler pleaded for an increase in Germans' knowledge of Poland.¹⁹ This speech, delivered by the highest representative of the country, illustrates a top-down approach to European integration. A great discrepancy remains between the official promotion of mutual friendship as it is formulated in the 1991 "Nachbarschaftsvertrag," and actual encounters among the people on both sides of the border.²⁰

Abendblatt Sept.5, 2005 states that, "Wir müssen uns damit abfinden, eine Gesellschaft des Weniger zu werden: weniger Jobs, weniger Sicherheit, weniger Reichtum für die meisten."

¹⁶ While both countries cover about the same amount of territory, the German population is more than twice as large as the Polish one, the German economy ten times as strong, and the Polish military expenses amount to only 20 percent of the German budget. Germany is Poland's most important trade partner, while Poland is just one among the many export markets for its Western neighbor. See Jäger 2009 (no pagination).

¹⁷http://www.bundespraesident.de/Reden-und-Interviews/Reden-Horst-Koehler-.12213.625633/25-Jahre-Solidarnosc-Ansprache.htm?global.back=/Reden-und-Interviews/-%2c12213%2c50/Reden-Horst-Koehler.htm%3flink%3dbpr_liste

¹⁸ http://www.bundespraesident.de/Reden-und-Interviews-.11057.665344/Vor-seiner-Reise-nach-Polen-sp.htm?global.back=/-%2c11057%2c0/Reden-und-Interviews.htm%3flink%3dbpr_liste%26link.sTitel%3dPolen

¹⁹http://www.bundespraesident.de/Reden-und-Interviews/Reden-Horst-Koehler-.12213.623648/Grusswort-von-Bundespraesident.htm?global.back=/Reden-und-Interviews/-%2c12213%2c52/Reden-Horst-Koehler.htm%3flink%3dbpr_liste

²⁰ For contemporary efforts of recognition and improvement of the Polish-German relationship, see the website of the German foreign ministry: <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Europa/DeutschlandInEuropa/BilateraleBeziehungen/Polen/DePIStart.html>, the German-Polish "Nachbarschaftsvertrag" (neighborhood treaty): <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Europa/DeutschlandInEuropa/BilateraleBeziehungen/Polen/Vertraege/Nachbarschaftsvertrag.pdf>, and the speeches of the German presidents <http://www.bundespraesident.de/-11057/Reden-und-Interviews.htm>. See also Alice Bota: "Von oben herab. Zerbricht Europa?" *Die Zeit* 26/2007. Online 16.07.2010.

When considering German and Polish film history, Randall Halle speaks of an anxiety or taboo when it comes to depictions of the neighboring country: "Even after 1989, whenever there was a general engagement with the East, Russia, the Ukraine, Yugoslavia, or even Georgia appeared in film as sites of German interest more frequently than did Poland."²¹

The hierarchies outlined above find their expression in signifying practices, such as written and oral communication, as well as in the visual media, in film and television practices that *Milchwald* both comments on and is part of. Filmmaking is a practice of writing that works with cues and viewer expectations. Classical narrative film has an established code of representation as it has been laid out in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. In the European cinematic movements of the 1960s and seventies, *Caméra Stylo* and *Cinéma Impure* became the keywords indicating the cinematic auteurs' attempts to converge film and literature.²²

The French deconstructionist Michel de Certeau analyses writing as a cultural practice that lends authority to a previously oral discourse. This practice institutionalizes something that otherwise has no grounding in reality and strips the present of its historicity, as if there had never been a past defining the present: "All proceeds as if writing had taken from time the double characteristic of loss of place (the exile) and of devouring life (cannibalism)" ("Heterologies" 29). It is a practice that exiles reality in favor of a virtual, created reality epitomized in the "writing machine," an automatism taking place in the permanent present, without a referent outside its own text: "Little by little, writing has replaced all of yesterday's myths with a practice designed to produce meaning. As a practice [...] writing symbolizes a society capable of managing the space which it sets up for itself" (Ahearne, "Michel de Certeau" 56). It means an artificial construction of center and periphery, self and other. It is an art that disguises itself as nature.

For de Certeau, the "other"—which could appear in the form of the past, the mad, the child, the religious, or the primitive—is repressed and transformed through the practice of writing, of producing and systematizing meaning and knowledge, without necessarily referring to actual reality: "What is writing then? I designate as 'writing' the concrete activity that consists in constructing, on its

²¹See Halle in the *German Quarterly*, Vol. 80, 2007. Some German films that do engage with Poland are Michael Klier's *Überall ist es besser wo wir nicht sind* (1988/89), Jan Schütte's *Auf Wiedersehen Amerika* (*Bye bye America*, 1994), Andreas Dresen's *Halbe Treppe* (*Grill Point*, 2002), Hans-Christian Schmid's *Lichter* (*Distant Lights*, 2003), and Henner Winckler's *Klassenfahrt* (2002).

²²The French *Nouvelle Vague* relied on two inherently literary concepts of a poetics of film: *Cinéma Impur*, a term André Bazin, head of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, coined to denote a self-conscious adaption of literary material in film; and *Caméra Stylo*, used by Alexandre Astruc in 1948 to compare the practice of filming to that of writing (see Werner Barg 78).

own, blank space (*un espace propre*)—the page—a text that has power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated” (“The Practice of Everyday Life” 134). Having worked as a critic for many film journals,²³ he certainly had film in mind as a form of writing, too. The author sees contemporary society as consumers of images and texts, of “voyeurs in a show biz society” (“The Practice of Everyday Life” xxi).

In the story that *Milchwald* recounts, writing as the inscription of a power discourse onto a blank page of the uncivilized body of the other is associated with Germany, the country in possession of the code defining the cultural norms in the new Europe. This requires removing something “excessive, diseased or unaesthetic from the (mute) body” (Ahearne, “The Scriptural Economy” 170), which is represented by Poland. The result is a flat image of the country, a modern myth that has nothing to do with the experience of living people. In the plot, the characters remain hopelessly caught up in the “writing” of the patriarchal hegemonic system, in this case Germany, and the capitalist market economy. In other words, they remain ignorant of the “fable,”²⁴ which shines through the practice of writing like the unconscious that resurfaces in Freud’s analysis of dreams. This is the reason why all the characters fail eventually.

This pessimistic interpretation is relativized if we direct our attention to the formal devices with which *Berliner Schule* is generally identified: exceptionally long shots, a static camera that keeps the actors at a distance, a mix of professional and non-professional actors, and authentic settings that remind one of documentaries.²⁵ The goal is to activate the reader via a disruption of the viewers’ expectations. On the formal level of *Milchwald*, the viewer is held suspended between identification with and distancing from the characters, between writing and oral fable, so that the disparity between both becomes obvious.²⁶ In other words, the audience, rather than the characters in the film, is

²³ “Among the 422 published items listed by Luce Giard in her definite bibliography, it is interesting to note that de Certeau wrote analyses of film for several journals: *Ça Cinéma*, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, *Telerama*, and *Cinéma*” (Ward 2).

²⁴ De Certeau defines “fable” as the “discourses [...] excluded by enlightened reason,” the site where the critique of bourgeois and technological society developed (“Heterologies” 15). The “fable” is a saying, truthful, veracious and present. It speaks to us (“Heterologies” 76).

²⁵ The formal devices of Hochhäusler’s film and the *Berliner Schule* in general are shared with contemporary European filmmakers such as the Dardenne brothers, Pedro Costa, Michael Haneke and the filmmakers of the Danish *Dogme 95* movement, such as Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, who are discussed and interviewed in *Revolver*, the central journal where *Berliner Schule* filmmakers exchange their ideas.

²⁶ The effect resembles a look into a mirror to see a realm both real and fictitious, both same and different, the heterotopia Michel Foucault describes in his “Other Spaces.” Heterotopic spaces are defined by Foucault in contrast to utopian spaces as realms that belong to our real, institutionalized realm of society, yet at the same time represent anti-places, actualized utopias, in which the real places are questioned and turned into their opposite. They are outside all proper

moved in *Milchwald*, and manages to get over deadly stasis that paralyzes contemporary Germany.²⁷ Primary identification with the camera instead of the characters guarantees that the spectator is not caught in the same myth as the protagonists. In this the *Berliner Schule*, of which Hochhäusler is spokesperson, relates to the tradition of German *Autorenfilm*. This movement established itself after the *Oberhausener Manifest* of 1962, in which young filmmakers demonstrated against the repressive cinematic apparatus that Hollywood had become. Theirs was a purpose geared against the Hollywood machinery of cinematic mass production. The student uprisings of that time period demanded the abolishment of hierarchies stemming from the fascist past, and the official recognition of this past in public discourse. Bourgeois family structures were criticized as well, as young people began to live in communes and to raise their children anti-authoritatively.

Contemporary filmmakers in Germany reach back to the “quality, of which one knows that it has been there in the past,”²⁸ to the generation of New German Film,²⁹ which renewed German film culture in the sixties and seventies, declaring “Papap Kino ist tot.”³⁰ On their communication platform, the film journal *Revolver*,³¹ *Berliner Schule* filmmakers frequently publish interviews with and references to the earlier generations of German filmmakers, such as Alexander Kluge, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders. Christoph Hochhäusler in particular has written passionate forewords reminiscent of the spirit of Young German Film.³² Contemporary filmmakers in Germany share with the

places, but can be localized. One example is the mirror, which is at the same time part of our every day culture, what it reflects is at the same time real and fictitious (“Von anderen Räumen” 320-321).

²⁷ See Marco Abel in *Cinéaste*, Vol. 33, No. 4, Fall (2008).

²⁸ Author’s translation: “Eine Qualität, von der man weiß, dass es sie schon einmal gegeben hat.” In: Alexander Kluge. *Bestandsaufnahme: Utopie Film* (1983).

²⁹ The term *New German Cinema* is generally used to talk about the wave of critical German film between the *Oberhausener Manifest* and the death of R.W. Fassbinder in 1982 (Corrigan 1994, Elsaesser 1989). However, a more detailed categorization provides the distinction between *Young German Film* (until 1970), *New German Cinema* (starting 1971), and *New German Film* (Feature films that achieved international recognition beginning in the late sixties).

³⁰ The full text of the *Oberhausener Manifest* can be found on the virtual museum website of the Deutsches Historisches Museum: http://www.hdg.de/lemo/html/dokumente/KontinuitaetUndWandel_erklaerungOberhausenerManifest/index.html

³¹ The journal was founded by Christoph Hochhäusler in 1997 and is published by *Filmverlag der Autoren*.

³² “Diese Zeitschrift will mehr sein als nur eine Ansammlung von Texten. Es geht um einen größeren Zusammenhang. Es geht darum, aufzustehen. Zu kämpfen! Für eine neue Gesellschaft, eine neue Liebe, einen neuen Film“ (foreword *Revolver* 5, 2001). Marco Abel calls Hochhäusler “one of the most critically astute, intellectually challenging and provocative writers about the contemporary German film scene” (“Tender Speaking” no pagination).

Oberhausen generation their difficult financial situation. There is no standardized way to finance a film. Filmmakers have to collect funds from diverse regional and European sponsors,³³ and often cooperate with television, curbing their own ideas to accommodate the market-pressure. This has recently led to a strike by students of the *DFFB* against their new director, Jan Schütte, the market-oriented filmmaker who succeeded Hartmut Bitomsky (Groh 28). In order to realize their own ideas, some young filmmakers have reverted to financing their own productions, such as Sören Voigt's *Identity Kills* (2003).

I will now quickly summarize the plot, before I turn to an analysis of specific scenes: The German siblings Lea and Konstantin are abandoned by their step-mother Silvia on a shopping trip to the other side of the border and left in the Polish countryside. The story, reminiscent of the Grimms' fairytale "Hansel and Gretel," evolves, cutting back and forth between the parents' perspective in Germany, and the children's struggle in the foreign environment. A Polish drifter, Kuba, who speaks their language and wins their trust, picks up the children. However, he increasingly tries to profit from them, eventually treating them like hostages. After a night of separation, Konstantin returns haggard and obviously abused. As the elder of the two, Lea finally realizes the dangerous position she and her brother are in and, like Gretel in the fairy tale killing the witch, attempts to poison Kuba, who abandons the two on the road. In a final shot, the children are shown walking off into the distance, the road ahead ending in a dim horizon.

The plot shifts back and forth between the depiction of "strategy" and "tactics" with the perspective of the ordered adult world on the German side of the border, and the children's quest in the jungle of the foreign environment. De Certeau calls "strategy" the planning that becomes possible when a subject has a proper place from where to launch "relations with an exterior distinct from it" ("The Practice of Everyday Life" 34- 39). "Tactics," on the other hand, have to be applied in the space of the other, when one can only count on opportunities of the moment, unable to conquer time from a base to call one's own. In this sense Silvia and her husband Joseph are located in their own realm. They have a place that can be described as proper. They have conquered time in the manner writing does in de Certeau's sense, while the children are caught up in the space of the other and have to constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities" ("The Practice of Everyday Life" xix).

The relationships between the two spouses, between the siblings, between parents and children, as well as between Germans and Poles in the film are clearly hierarchical. The children and Silvia represent the marginal within the German

³³ Some EU programs financing transnational films are the *European Film Promotion (EFP)*, *EURIMAGES* and the *MEDIA-Programm* of the European Council. German sponsors are the *Filmförderanstalt (FFA)*, and regional finances, such as the *Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg*, *Filmförderung Hamburg*, or the *Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung*.

hegemonic power. When they cross the border to Poland and are thus put outside their proper place, the children become victims of the very writing machine of which they are a part. Ultimately, the violent inscription onto the other harms the part of the self that is exposed, "othered," and left without a proper place. When the writing machine writes on its own body it commits suicide, it erases its own future.³⁴ Thus, the practice of writing by the hegemonic discourse turns against itself when directed against the self as other, against children and women in this case. As de Certeau contends in *Heterologies*, children represent the future of a society, as well as the internal other. A successful integration of alterity is thus crucial to a society's future.

Silvia as a woman and mother is representative of the future and the marginal just like the children. The reference to milk in the German title of the film points to the role of the mother or pregnant woman as a figure of expectation, nourishment and future. It is thus significant that we find Silvia the opposite of a maternal figure.³⁵ On the one hand, she is referred to as step-mother of the children, Lea and Konstantin; on the other hand, the film depicts her as potentially pregnant in the scene after she has abandoned her step-children on a shopping trip to Poland.

The title of Hochhäusler's film also corresponds to the feeling of disorientation that can be experienced when walking through thick, foggy woods. The name "Milchwald" also denotes the mythic forest, where clear vision is impossible and paths are visually obstructed. Hansel and Gretel in the fairy tale experience the world from below, like the walkers in de Certeau's *Walking the City* ("The Practice of Everyday Life" 91- 110). Always connected to the ground, they are blind to the whole; they are lost in space and have to rely on tactics, on decisions made in the very moment, hence the English title of the film. They cannot take advantage of experience, which is connected to temporal continuation. In this sense their weakness is the weakness of a Germany oblivious to its own past. The apparent superiority of German cleanliness and, in fact, the sterile appeal of the newly built structures in the scenes that depict the family house represents a lack of identity and acknowledged experience. Ultimately, Germans, like the marginalized, live in "this very moment," and have to rely on tactics when changing places.

The film starts out with a shot on the German side of the border, reminiscent of expressionist landscapes of terror. A wavy road with electric posts along its

³⁴ Since de Certeau mentions Kafka as one of the hermetic writers of the "writing machine," the machine "In the Penal Colony" breaks down when its supervisor is put to death on it.

³⁵ In German film the image of mother often becomes an allegory of *Heimat* or Germany as a whole, as in *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* by Helma Sanders-Brahms (1980). Women characters such as *Lola* in R.W. Fassbinder's *BRD- Trilogie* film of the same title (1981) serve the opposite function and embody destructive eroticism endangering bourgeois order.

side emerges out of the vanishing point in the extreme left of the image. The road widens, leading towards the viewer and the right side of the frame. Clear lines mark this shot, which leaves an impression of lurking danger as the siblings Lea and Konstantin wander at the side of the road toward the camera. Germany is depicted as a country with perfect conditions for mediated communication, made for traffic, an infrastructure rather than a landscape. Children being marginal in society, this shot focuses on the margins of the image. The children seem fundamentally displaced. Benedikt Schiefer's electronic music leaves an uncanny impression of a world fundamentally out of joint. The music is also reminiscent of traditional *Film Noir*.³⁶



1 *Milchwald* 00:01:37

©

Filmgalerie 451

The tension created by music and moving image in the first scene reaches its climax with Silvia's car overtaking the siblings. Lea has just proven her superiority by commanding "Konsti" to come along. As the older of the two, she has already learned to use language as a code that can be used as a means to an end. She is establishing her authority through performative speech when she ironizes her step-mother's attempt to engage Konsti in a song, and later mocks her

³⁶ The theme in the classical *Film Noir* of the postwar era is male failure in face of a world out of joint, as Elsaesser formulates it: "The disaster, the catastrophe, has already happened. It is definitely too late (for action), yet too early (for closure)" (author's translation, "Hollywood Heute" 43). Border experiences challenge the protagonists' capacity to act and mix up their sense of time, banning them in a state of permanent present. *Neo-Noir*, Elsaesser claims, has to do with an excess of experience in the postmodern world, where the individual is so saturated with perception via the media, that these experiences cannot be handled by the protagonist, who consequently becomes numb for human emotions, as if he was already dead: "It hurts so much that I don't feel it anymore" (Foster 106). The main protagonists of these movies are "in a state of inversion. Despite their anticipation of catastrophe they are unable to help themselves and become observers of their own destruction" (author's translation, "Hollywood Heute" 46).

chiding tone, turning her words into empty signifiers. Next, Lea claims she has to "go pee." This leads to Silvia abandoning both children in a Polish field at the side of the road.

The ability to make sense of and utilize signifiers as a tool to gain control over a situation is a political strategy and requires a purely material world, in which languages can be literally translated, where signifier and signified can easily be separated and exchanged. As opposed to this type of communicative system, for Konstantin, words refer to things existing in reality. He takes what his sister says literally, and he has trouble conquering space as he stays behind to play and tie his shoelace. One could say that for him writing is still mystic, as he cannot yet read and enjoys the song "Brother Jacob," which points to fable, to spirits and voices from another realm.³⁷

When Lea and Konstantin are left alone on the street and start walking into the Polish field, the protective shield of detached language games lifts, and material reality enters the purely symbolic and rhetorical space. The camera in this shot is installed close to the ground on the road and follows the gradual disappearance of the children in the road ditch, while a tractor passes through the frame in extreme close-up, thus visually running over the two. The diegetic sound of the machine is exaggerated, and a cut to Silvia's car suggests her complicity with the world of traffic that is threatening the children. Both the vehicles on the road and the automatic power discourse are destructive machines colonizing the mute body of the other—of the innocent child Konstantin in the first scene and of both children as foreigners in Poland in what follows.

While the children experience the harsh materiality of the neighboring country, Silvia is in control and emotionally detached from the surroundings, yet oscillating between ascetic suppression of feelings and excessive emotionality. Women in the films of *Berliner Schule* often appear machine-like or spectral, unreal and deadly, instead of life-giving, nourishing, and maternal. Examples of this can be found in Christian Petzold's *Yella* (2007) and *Gespenster* (2005), in Ulrich Köhler's *Morgen kommen die Fenster* (2006), and Sören Voigt's *Identity Kills* (2003).³⁸ In one scene of *Milchwald*, Silvia tears out of a travel map the page containing the area in Poland where she left Konsti and Lea. A buzzing cello dramatizes this scene, as she leans over the map, all-powerful and in possession of the geographic knowledge from birds-eye's view. The shot before depicted the siblings walking up an inclined plane, the camera peeking through the trees,

³⁷ De Certeau says about song that it is "the spirit of the group," which "expresses what lies beyond the 'own' (le propre), which it puts back into common circulation" ("Heterologies" 76).

³⁸ In Christian Petzold's *Yella*, for example, the main character does not know whether she is dead or alive. The catastrophe took place in the beginning of the story as a "border experience" in the literal and allegorical sense, her ex-boyfriend's car crashing into the former inner-German border river, the Elbe. In the plot, Yella is haunted by her ex-boyfriend and becomes herself haunting, as she drives a company owner to commit suicide in the end.

emphasizing their being down there, in the jungle of the actual world not represented on the map. For Silvia, the children's whereabouts are just a matter of abstract location, a point on a map, while for them the whole body is involved.



2 *Milchwald* 00:09:26

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Hunger leads them to approach the drifter Kuba, who, like the witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” lures them into his dwelling, a van full of cleaning supplies. He speaks their language and provides food. At least in the beginning he is more of a maternal figure than the German step-mother. The value system needed to accommodate the children is the maternal one, which regards every human being as equally valuable, a social system contrary to capitalism, which recognizes use value instead of exchange value.

Remnants of such a system can be found in the maternal type of Polish female characters, which render Poland a heterotopic space in the sense that Michel Foucault uses the term—a space existing in social reality, pointing to an alternative order. Lea catches a glimpse of this motherly alternative order when she sees a simple woman in a household dress cutting an old man's hair in a Polish motel room, both conversing peacefully and quietly. Another maternal figure in the film is the female social worker helping out at the Catholic fair in a small town. While Kuba takes off to visit his girlfriend, the siblings stay in a tent next to the church, where a woman provides soup and pets Lea on the head.³⁹

The clear hierarchies visible in the mediated communication between Joseph and Silvia are the opposite of the loving care the children witness outside the confines of their own family constellation. As Joseph arrives home, he doesn't notice Silvia, and goes straight into what seems to be his office. Various attempts

³⁹ She is also the one who will shelter Lea the following night and comb her hair in a scene reminiscent of the hair cutter's scene in the motel.

from his side to ask for the children and from her side to tell him are obstructed. Joseph only finds out that the children are missing when listening to the messages on the answer machine. He carefully keeps Silvia out of his investigations, and he lets her stay at home when going out to search for the children.

Yet it is Silvia who is the secret owner of knowledge and the gaze.⁴⁰ This is epitomized in a scene where she watches Joseph moving around the stage of an old amphitheater from an elevated view point in the spectators' ranks. Since the time of the Greek Polis, the amphitheater represents the visibility of the public sphere and collective decision-making. Significantly, this location functioned as assembly ground for Germans during the Third Reich, and was later transformed into a Polish memorial site. It thus speaks of a highly sensitive issue in each country's national identity and respective historical consciousness.⁴¹



3 *Milchwald* 01:02:30

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What distinguishes the Polish landscape, buildings and interiors from the ones on the German side of the border is the visibility of time, of wear and tear, of the past that nobody cares to clean up. Discourse has not flattened out the reality here in a standardized "writing," but the natural relationship of things is still visible. Reality changes, and space is in constant transformation and cannot be summed up in a fixed image that has conquered time in favor of place. The Polish environment indicates a social historicity, similar to the way Vermont's Shelburne

⁴⁰ The traditional constellation of female objectification by the male gaze in cinema (see Mulvey) has been replaced by a de-sexualized, distanced, almost cold view. In fact, critics of the *Berliner Schule* lament exactly this lack of emotional attraction. Silvia is presented almost boyishly, with short hair, a skinny figure, and little makeup.

⁴¹ A full analysis of the memory site of Annaberg/ Góra Św. Anny can be found in James Bjork and Robert Gerwarth. "The Annaberg as a German-Polish *Lieu de Mémoire*." *German History* 2007, 25(3), 372-400.

Museum in de Certeau's essay, "includes innumerable familiar objects, polished, deformed, or made more beautiful by long use; everywhere there are as well the marks of the active hands and laboring or patient bodies for which these things composed the daily circuits, the fascinating presence of absences whose traces were everywhere" ("The Practice of Everyday Life" 21).

In contrast to the parents' house, which is hermetically sealed with window blinds, the Polish motel, where Kuba and the children spend the first night, is full of light with doors and windows wide open. Lea can walk along the corridor and peek into the different rooms, in one of which a red telephone is ringing without anyone picking up. For the viewer, this creates an association with Silvia, who stayed at home as Joseph told her, "in case somebody calls." Later, Kuba is shown picking up the same red phone to call the parents.⁴² This call, as well as the next, remains unheard, as Silvia is fast asleep with tranquilizers and Joseph is out on the public stage, looking for them.

The complicity between Kuba and the children only lasts as long as economic interests and public discourse are kept out of the equation, and they are involved on a purely private level. This willingness to help is immediately corrupted once economic interests enter the equation, when Kuba decides to return the children to their parents for money after having seen their pictures on the German news. Kuba's earlier attempts to communicate with the siblings on equal terms are now forgotten. Initially, the camera had framed him and the children sitting next to each other in the truck, thus making them equal in a community of passengers, as opposed to the individual framing of each passenger in Silvia's car.

Without any money, and without each other, the children are turned into potential commodities, relying completely on the charity of the people around. They become the test case for how friendly the German-Polish relations really are, since the children have no means to buy the friendship or help from their environment. Polish children turn out to be their enemies, who fight over the coins in a public fountain. Having no sense of history and political relations or even their mutual "otherness," their relationship consists merely of economic competition, which is inevitably hostile. The woman selling the bus tickets is not helpful either, as she does not accept the wet coins as proper payment and could not care less about the children's fate. She proves unable to empathize with the children, for whom the coins, scrambled in the fountain battle, have great value.

While in the mediated and artificial German environment the children's inequality just led to games of power among the siblings, now the dangers of traffic are real and life-threatening for Konstantin. The German "Verkehr" stands for communication, commerce, and sexual intercourse, all of which mutilate

⁴² He uses the children's secret code to remember the number, which is "2Esel" in computer script turned upside down.

Konstantin, who experiences something terrible during the night separated from his sister. It is implied that Konsti is raped during the night he spends next to a night club, while Lea, instinctively avoiding the dangers of the adult world she had a chance to observe earlier, found shelter and nourishment in a church, the institution that starkly contrasts to the radically secular and cynic world of traffic, which is associated with the parents. As opposed to Konstantin, Lea is able to turn sexuality into a weapon, using her communicative strategies to blackmail Kuba.

As I want to argue, the problem with the cultural politics of the European Union is that they are implemented from above, by planners who don't experience the countries and their people from below as the "trace structure of meaning" (de Certeau). What is needed for a true understanding among the different peoples of the European Union, which Poland joined shortly after the film was released, is personal contact and the effort to learn each other's languages. This effort is featured in the film in a touching scene following Kuba's unsuccessful call to Germany from a phone booth. Turning to leave the grounds, Kuba picks up a flower growing between the cobble-stones and makes it "speak" to Konsti. In the course of this conversation Konstantin learns the Polish words for "yes" and "thank you." It resembles the kind of cultural exchange EU bureaucrats would like to implement, but is not possible without the good will of the people involved, the willingness to understand each other without pursuing personal interests and to put oneself on equal grounds even with an economically weaker neighbor.



4 *Milchwald* 00:43:42

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The type of direct personal communication displayed in this scene is diametrically opposed to the mediated communication that mainly takes the form of phone calls between Joseph and Silvia. This distanced form of communication

is also the basis for Joseph's negotiations with Kuba. In this conversation Joseph makes the same mistakes as in his relationship with his wife. Instead of taking him seriously, Joseph prefers to keep the hierarchy intact and to pretend that he is still in control of the course of events. A conversation on equal terms with Kuba would have been much more effective, just like an honest conversation with Silvia would have been. It was the father's idea to offer a reward for the children, thus making them objects of trade and at the same time turning Kuba into a criminal.

That the amphitheater is designated as the spot where the exchange is to take place, and where it eventually fails, is significant in terms of the German-Polish political relationship in times of European integration. It points to the inadequate strategy Joseph applies to retrieve his children. While Kuba always solves problems on the personal level—asking people on the street, in one scene a man on a balcony, for help and refraining from calling the police—Joseph makes personal problems public. Instead of talking to his wife, he organizes a police search and posts the pictures of his children on television, creating a crime story to distract from the real problem in his family. In a way he creates a prosthetic trauma to cover up his own guilt of implementing his own family politics from above without ever considering the feelings and emotional relationships among the other family members. Joseph is an urban planner by profession and thus the perfect allegory for the EU projects engineered by professionals and detached from real-life circumstances of personal relationships and emotional attitudes towards the other in European borderlands.

For Silvia and Joseph the decisive turn of the story occurs when they are forced to cross the border together. Not only do they now have to leave the comfortable center and deal with the neighboring country on its own terms, they also have to confront each other, neither of them able to walk out or flee to another room as they had done previously in the house. Meaningful gazes are exchanged at the border post, indicating Silvia and Joseph's mutual recognition of the truth—of their own guilt. They became the accomplices in a crime against their own children in trying to cover up the original sin, sexual desire so overbearing that it turned against the children's needs for a healthy family. After all, both partners broke up previous family ties in order to be together. If we accept the interpretation of this marriage as a metaphor for the inner German relationship between East and West, then the German-Polish border becomes a test case for the future of the unified country. Silvia's breakdown and the children's drifting in the end thus point to a full failure of Germany's relation to itself and to its others.

While Poles seem to have some knowledge of German contemporary society,⁴³ Silvia and Joseph remain ignorant of the neighboring country, and

⁴³ Kuba probably knows the German language from experiences as a migrant worker doing unwanted manual labor for a low salary in Germany. In another scene, Kuba is shown in the

appear chauvinistic when they cannot stop laughing about the clumsiness of the motel restaurant waitress, who walks into another waiter and drops her dishes. This moment represents one of the rare occasions of mutual understanding between the spouses. Joseph, in his telephone conversation with Kuba, is conscious of his superior status and demands to talk to his children. To him it is very self-evident that people in Poland speak German and would be glad to earn some extra cash. Even from a distance he thinks he can control the situation. Kuba, finding himself pushed, just shouts “no” and hangs up.

Silvia at the same time represents and is the victim of the rational world of the machine. The perpetrator and victim side of her identity cannot be integrated, which becomes clear in the scene in a public bathroom of the motel, where she and Joseph expect to receive the children. Through the open door she sees her naked son being washed and prepared for the exchange. Kuba cannot be seen as a wall with huge mirrors obstructs Silvia’s vision. Instead, the camera juxtaposes Silvia’s mirror image with the image of Kuba the perpetrator, who is ready to sell the children like commodity products. Realizing her guilt and ultimate complicity with the kidnapper, Silvia falls apart, the camera now framing her leaning against the mirror and thus presenting her doubly in the image.



5 *Milchwald* 01:12:52

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She is no longer part of the “reading” audience, as reality and the symbolic fall apart, and she falls out of the texture of the human world. In the next shot she emerges out of the backdoor, between the huge letters of the Polish motel, virtually exiting scripture. Instead of words, nature speaks to her when in her final appearance in the film the road signs in the form of huge arrows point towards the

apartment of one of his girlfriends, watching a German news broadcast. German media have the power to transcend the border, and German language infiltrates Polish homes.

highway as if leading her in this direction. This time, her blackout at the side of the road seems final, as rushing traffic is shown speeding across her body in a blurred close-up, while Joseph is waiting in the empty parking lot.

Time and space appear out of joint, as the children are seen in the back of Kuba's car again after the exchange is implied to have failed. The audience does not know what has happened in the meantime or where Kuba is taking the children. Now, with Silvia as the provider of knowledge, the secret center of the story is gone, and it is the viewer who is in the dark, just like Joseph before. Enlightenment has failed at last, and the sun is descending in the last shot, leaving a whitish, milky light as the children vanish at the horizon, walking down the open road and away from the film's audience. The music score ascends and descends at the same time, moving upwards in octaves, and downwards in scales, leaving an uncanny impression reminiscent of the opening shot. Up until the last shot two antagonistic mechanisms move in opposite directions, and the happy end of Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel" is turned into an unsatisfactory ambiguity.

It is the spectator who is abandoned at last, if we look at the story and formal aspects of *Milchwald*. Primary identification, or what Marco Abel terms "viral politics," the direct appeal of these films to the viewers' nervous systems, not to their consciousness, prevents the viewer from being caught up in the same machine of communication as the characters.⁴⁴ The modern myth is visible because the director makes the viewer stare at reality for minutes, or because strange angles and perspectives leave the impression of a reality out of joint.

If the film solicits any hope, it might be the possibility of transcendence in Poland, where the "mystic" as the opposite of the "celibatory machine" is present in the image of the Catholic Church, and where interiors still have a homely quality to them. In Poland, women are motherly providers and *Heimat* still seems possible.⁴⁵ But at the same time it is rendered impossible or corrupted, as the female church worker cannot protect Lea from Kuba, and as the unborn child of Kuba's girlfriend will be illegitimate. Poland becomes a "heterotopias," pointing both toward and restricting alternatives for the existing order. Up until the last shot two antagonistic mechanisms move in opposite directions, and the happy end of Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel" is turned into an unsatisfactory ambiguity.

⁴⁴ Abel 2007, no pagination: "I see his films (and the "Berlin School" films at large) as engaging in a political project that might be productively described with reference to the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, namely as pursuing what one might call a viral politics—a politics that attempts to encounter the desires circulating on the neoliberal plane of contemporary globalization on its own terms, *on the level of desire*: that is to say, on the level of affect. In other words, unlike a more traditional politics of consciousness-raising, the politics of these films tends to appeal directly to the nervous system by affecting viewers through submitting them to a modulation of intensities to which we have no choice but to respond."

⁴⁵ Kuba's pregnant girlfriend, who is presented as another motherly figure and is shown mending Kuba's pants, talks about painting the apartment and creating a nice home for her newborn.

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