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Cover image: TV title graphic from *Open End*

BoTSL#5 2013 JUN 10 12:32 PM

The year is 1970. Which is to say that it is not yet the seventies. The talk show presenter and his guest speakers are, therefore, somewhat standardized: white and male. Because it is 1970, they talk about "the sixties" with false distance. They talk of the student movement with warmth and regret. The words "Auschwitz" and "art" can now coexist in the same sentence. Video cameras shoot the show as if it were a poker game, orbiting seated speakers and hovering over the shoulder of one guest to see the face of another. Light from the spot-lit panelists splashes onto the pale arms, hands, and feet of a cameraman, visible in the dark recesses of the studio, headless. This is the talk show before the sophisticated excess of flattery, fawning introductions, and therapeutic dialog. Speakers are not yet steeled against extemporaneous chatter, they do not entirely "act natural." And yet, nascent hallmarks of the talk show format are already present: adversarial conduct is encouraged, casual anecdote is taken as evidence, and the conversation is unnecessarily mediated and recapped. In the attempt to be both "hard-hitting" and "off-the-cuff," the host and guests (and perhaps also the at-home audience) desire a public stage for unresolvable conflicts, arguments that can be gently extrapolated and then politely concluded with everyone agreeing to disagree. This is true with the exception of one guest: a 38-year-old filmmaker who does not want to proceed as planned.

We know of the man's incipient rebellion before the program even begins. This is because the content of this particular episode of the *Open End* talk show, broadcast by West German television on April 3, 1970, has necessitated the insertion of an atypical disclaimer announcement beforehand. A young man with long hair and a moustache appears on screen. He sits behind a desk with a neatly laid out script. Closely cropped in TV news anchor pose, he carefully reads aloud:

Ladies and gentleman, you are about to see a discussion that was recorded two weeks ago and did not go as expected. Hans-Geert Falkenberg brought together the director Alexander Kluge, the Munich film critic Siegfried Schober, and the journalist and trade union consultant, Dieter Schmidt. The topic was to be the relationship between society and film, in particular with respect to the films of Alexander Kluge. We presented the work of this important young German filmmaker in a number of programs last week.

After about 45 minutes, this discussion of our Kluge season took an unexpected turn when the director Georg Alexander passed a note to the presenter. Mr. Kluge protested against what he saw as attempted manipulation, and there was a serious quarrel between Georg Alexander and Alexander Kluge, a quarrel recorded by the cameras without the participants' knowledge and with only a brief interruption of a few seconds.

Only after a further 45 minutes was the discussion brought to an end at Alexander Kluge's request. Then, with the cameras switched off, they discussed whether the whole thing should be broadcast. Cameramen and lighting technicians spontaneously joined the debate, and were unanimous in their opinion that the discussion recorded should be broadcast in its full, unedited form. Then the discussion resumed. A small section of blank film marks the interruption. The director also found an authentic confrontation to be more important than a smooth, academic exchange of views. The following unorthodox recording also poses a question about the form and procedure of televised discussion, and may encourage critical examination of Alexander Kluge's work.

In Kluge's 1968 feature film *Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed*, the young female protagonist Leni Peickert inherits a circus. Bored with the tired spectacle of traditional carny performance, she seeks to "reform" the big top into a space of socially relevant entertainment — one which denies the audience what they have come to crave, and replaces their expectations with radical new avant-garde performances. Over the course of the film, Peickert's circus turns into a commercial failure, and its conceptual value goes unrecognized. She abandons the project, disillusioned, to take a job in television. A barely-veiled surrogate for Kluge himself, Peickert and her "reformed circus" is the initial talking point for Hans-Geert Falkenberg's weekly talk show *Open End*. *Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed* was televised by the channel shortly before the talk show for home audiences, and the film's theme — the unending battle between artistic vision and the normalizing institution — is to be Kluge's primary obsession both during *Open End* and, arguably, throughout the rest of his professional life. Unaware of the strength of Kluge's cardinal preoccupation, Falkenberg innocently begins his talk show proceedings with a few general questions — the type that might prime the audience with a couple of thematic concerns:

FALKENBERG: (Turns left to look at Kluge, then looks straight ahead, blinks several times and stares into the middle distance) Our question is, (pause) how can one, in our times, (pause) use stories to reach society, (pause) to move it (nods), perhaps touch it, (pause) and even change it? (Pauses, pensively pushing out bottom lip) Is this possible, and if so, how can, for example, a film such as *Artists* achieve this, or can't it?

KLUGE: Mr. Falkenberg, that was a lot of questions all at once. I don't think it's a coincidence that you used "touch," "change," and "reach society" as keywords here. The problem is that with the means we have been using, producing films for an anonymous cinema audience will not get us very far.

Throughout his career, Kluge's forays into television programming have been surprisingly numerous given his *auteur* status in German film. These television programs are eclectic and near impossible to parse except in terms of their contrarian nature. Together, they largely serve to put into

practice ideas set forth in *Public Sphere and Experience*, Kluge's book of social criticism co-authored with Oskar Negt in 1972, which contains a chapter devoted entirely to articulating the problems of public television programming. (The pair argue television is not only a generalizing influence, but also regulates forms of communication to the point that it prohibits legitimate forms of response; the private home viewer is MEANT to feel disenfranchised from the mainstream.)

But unlike the acclaim he and Negt received for *Public Sphere and Experience*, Kluge's television broadcasts are often described in deeply unsympathetic terms, both for their apparent lack of technical ability and their presentation style. Even his co-workers at the RTL cable television station described his TV programs as "loveless, cobbled-together stuff." Hard wipes, scrolling text, freeze frames, and an eclectic palette of other early digital editing techniques punctuate or else interrupt the documentary aspects of his programming. In his television interview with the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, for instance, a ribbon of text information

intermittently scans across the screen, sometimes with information: "Luhmann is, with Jürgen Habermas, one of the great theoreticians of our time;" other times with self-conscious prompts: "Careful of understanding too quickly." Finally, the text trails off, concluding the program: "Encounter with a public thinker in private mode." Unlike the genial television presenter, Kluge will never agree to disagree, he will never diffuse the argument. As filmmaker Harun Farocki once noted, Kluge is just too much of a monomaniac to make cooperation possible.

To facilitate or comply with the reception of one's work is a necessary part of displaying, disseminating and, hopefully, popularizing it. Talk shows and non-fiction television programming serve as one such mediating outlet. But for the typical talk show viewer, the pleasure of the banal conventions arises less in the content exchanged between its onscreen participants, and more in the possibility of failure, of silence. Media critic Jay Rosen shrewdly notes, "Just below the surface of the polite conversation and friendly joking is the threat that, after sitting down, the guest and host will have nothing to say. The talk show magnifies the terror of that awkward moment when conversation begins (or falters), something that everyone in the audience has felt. In a way, this is the 'plot' of every talk show: A series of guests arrive, each creating a potentially awkward social situation that must be managed smoothly. The skill of the host in diffusing the tension is one of the pleasures the viewer is offered." The chance of conversation malfunction is THE primary titillation for the viewer, and yet muteness is to be avoided at all costs; the viewer's pleasure is constantly denied by the host. The host is not the only person guarding against such silent pitfalls; the continuity editor, teleprompter, and director are all on hand to fill the void. Failure to uphold polite conversation doesn't just lead to the collapse of the talk show as we know it; such dissolution produces a largely untested form of televised conversation. And when one's target (in Kluge's case, the mainstreaming influence of popular television programming) is also its space of reception (*Open End*), contradictions inevitably arise—contradictions in which Kluge thrives.

SCHOBER: **I feel I have to defend television, to a certain extent. If we go on like this, we'll end up with total negativity by saying that it's totally impossible to do anything on television that can have a stabilizing effect. [Studio assistant walks into shot, behind** SCHOBER, **with a paper note in**

his right hand] I believe television has developed its own means, and has possibilities that can be developed, and we definitely shouldn't drop below the level of these possibilities.

KLUGE: Here's an example. This is how TV works. [With one hand, KLUGE grabs hold of FALKENBERG's wrist, and with his free hand motions to a piece of paper next to FALKENBERG] He is handed a note: "You have been allowing Mr. Kluge to manipulate you for 45 minutes. We have a topic!" I think it's appalling that people here — I think you are more enlightened than Mr. Alexander — but this manipulative approach from the director, who has a fixed idea about how the topic be dealt with, and who sees it as manipulation when one tries to express oneself. Why do you invite us if you don't want to hear what we have to say?

ALEXANDER: [Voice off-screen] We're stopping the program here. Mr. Kluge, you are the one who came here with fixed ideas. [On-screen image goes black] Even before the discussion started —

FALKENBERG: (Interrupting) Wait a moment! It's a great pity you're doing this, Mr. Alexander —

KLUGE: (Interrupting) Mr. Alexander, I have to be very blunt with you now. Your method, and I don't mean just this here now, is totally unacceptable.

ALEXANDER: [Voice off-screen] I feel the same about your methods.

At the moment where a piece of paper is passed from the program director to the talk show host 42 minutes into the recording, *Open End* unintentionally replaces its blandly ambiguous talk show's thematic question of "Film and Society?" with another that, although never verbally articulated in the course of the show, is explicitly performed and tested: *Is it possible to meaningfully disturb the boundary between production and reception, and to use the latter to embody the former?* Like a secret schoolroom note to be passed along and never read by its subject, the director's memo, when exposed, signals the dissolution of the talk show's ability to enforce politeness. As the conversation unravels and moves from the studio presentation of professional on-screen critical

personas to the disorganized off-record chatter that occurs between takes, Mr. Alexander, the director, relocates from the safe proximity of the viewing gallery to take his own chair at the panelists' table. The rupture caused by this shift in hierarchy is irreparable; the talk show's finely tuned manners of turn-taking and smooth subject transitions lie in tatters, and the delicate three-step convention of question-answer-affirmation quickly becomes impossible.

FALKENBERG: (Impatiently) Mr. Kluge —

KLUGE: May I finish?

SCHOBER: I don't want to hear anything about the protest movement, I want to hear about Kluge the filmmaker —

ALEXANDER: Nor do I want to hear about art, but about the chance to articulate —

KLUGE: (Interrupting) And that's the same thing to me.

ALEXANDER: (Shouting) But it's not the same thing!

KLUGE: It is. May I explain something? This is a dialectic process—

SCHOBER: You said that the ruling classes have laid claim to art—

KLUGE: And have a certain freedom—

ALEXANDER: (Interrupting) I would deny that the ruling classes have that.

KLUGE: But that's relative. The fact is that, up to now, art only had a relationship to life for aristocrats or the upper classes. It had a relationship to their lives.

ALEXANDER: We've drifted away from these articulation problems again. They have these problems—

KLUGE: No! Everyone has articulation problems.

ALEXANDER: Absolutely. But they do in particular, because of their class situation. They don't give a damn about your "love of art." It means nothing to them.

KLUGE: (Offended) That's a pretty crude observation.

SCHOBER: I just see this as an idealizing articulation that clouds the overall situation—

KLUGE: That's right, yes, but for music, it's complicated. Whether it only idealizes—

SCHOBER: (Interrupting) We're not talking about music.

KLUGE: I'm saying that there is no relationship of film to society, only that of thinking and communication to society—

ALEXANDER: (Interrupting) Mr. Kluge, why don't you answer my question?

KLUGE: You keep interrupting me. I'd hardly finished one sentence, and three people started talking.

ALEXANDER: Because you take so long!

KLUGE: (Irritated) Excuse me, but this is because it is a complicated idea that is long! May I say two things? One: up to now, intensity of expression has only developed in art. For example, Hegelian philosophy. (Pause) I see no difference between art and thinking—

SCHOBER: I'm sorry, but I have to interrupt you here. You say... (Pause) I think that better chances of expression have developed elsewhere.

FALKENBERG: Like where?

SCHOBER: In everyday forms of protest. For me, a demonstration or—

FALKENBERG: Articulation?

SCHOBER: Yes. For me, simply laying down tools in a factory or a job is a much more valuable and effective form of articulation. And this is no longer about art.

KLUGE: May I just express my thought? Because it's a dialectic, half of it is of no use at all. [ALEXANDER groans] May I say something, Mr. Alexander?

ALEXANDER: The history of philosophy and Hegel is long.

KLUGE: That's not what I'm after. I just want to shake your head up a bit if you'll allow me that much. [ALEXANDER snickers]

Although silence is the undoubted nemesis of the talk show, its inverse —interruption—is another serious malady. Interruption's disorderly syntax stymies the carefully crafted narratives of the shape-making host.

It dispenses with smooth talk in favor of three characteristics: impatience, intrusion, and resistance. It can begin with the smallest of gesture—a discreet memo, for example—but, as is evident, interruption can quickly become contagious. Indeed, director Alexander's interruption (both his physical intervention into the panelists' circle, and his verbal intrusions into their debate) is infectious, reducing all participants to babble. The attempt to discretely intervene by memo is not so much an inadvertent trigger that sets off the disruption of the show; rather, the memo is the excuse Kluge had been looking for all along. And once disorder is invoked, even the court jester can afford to take a backseat.

FALKENBERG: I think we should clarify one thing—that everyone acted with the best intentions, whatever our different aims. (Nodding) We should attest to this, and that Mr. Alexander joined in with more than a little, actually with total acrimony. (Laughs, raises voice) That's very clear, and maybe it was legitimate, because this was totally going against the argument the two of you had talked about ten minutes before.

(Gesticulating vigorously with hand, shaking head, speaking loudly) Because what happened here has never happened in television before!

SCHMIDT: No reason to shout at me.

FALKENBERG: (Still shouting) I'm not shouting! (Laughing) I'm just saying that this accusation against the institution, in the sweeping manner in which you formulate it, is not correct! On the contrary, this apparatus that you assume to be sweeping and undifferentiated, and reactionary and conservative, always defensive and concealing, always distracting, never reflecting: "What are we actually doing here?" This is not true!

SCHMIDT: Masturbation.

UNIDENTIFIED CREW MEMBER: [Off-screen] Any time you're ready.

FALKENBERG: [Swiftly turning to look into the camera] Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupted this discussion because we weren't sure whether we should continue in the manner in which we had been progressing. [Camera pulls out to a long shot revealing a group of studio workers lined up on set] You all saw that the director responsible for this discussion, Georg Alexander, passed a note to me outlining his impression of how the discussion had been going, and that Alexander Kluge reacted to this interruption. The discussion then took an unexpected turn in that Mr. Alexander joined in and clearly laid down his objections to the discussion among the participants. We asked ourselves whether what has happened here can be broadcast, and that's why we stopped. I've asked all the technicians in the studio, camera people, the grips, and the director out there, whether they because they are now part of the audience we cannot reach — whether they think this discussion, chaotic though it may be — because it hasn't run along the carefully laid lines of a smooth TV discussion, whether it can be broadcast or not. And now I want to pose this question again, as I did about 20 minutes ago: Do you think that what you have seen in the studio up to now should be shown to the audience on the Friday after next?

Incongruous juxtaposition and the continual re-editing of other people's dialogue are the usual hallmarks of any Kluge feature film. In *Open End*,

we find its talk show parallel. The confusion and simultaneous chatter deny coherent conversation, and the debate shatters into concomitant conversations of Kluge's vanity, workers' rights, free speech, and checking to see if the one woman working on the program could get involved in the discussions, too (apparently not: she never appears). New, inappropriate behaviors make a mockery of the formerly appropriate ones. These ruptures of the talk show's format make evident what is usually absent. A new order, structured through collective agreement, emerges.

FALKENBERG: Do you think that what you have seen in the studio up to now should be shown to the audience on the Friday after next?

CREW MEMBER #1: Yes, because a discussion should entail clashes of opinions, and it would be manipulation to pretend otherwise to an audience.

FALKENBERG: Thank you. Pass the microphone on and let's hear other opinions.

CREW MEMBER #2: I agree, and vote for continuing the discussion in the same format.

CREW MEMBER #3: Yes, the discussion definitely should continue. Mr. Alexander expressed the objections that a large part of the audience formulated during the program that ran up to now. After this interruption, the discussion took a turn that resulted in the group talking about what had to be discussed.

ALEXANDER: Add that you are an editor.

CREW MEMBER #3: I'm not a grip, I'm a film editor. Name: Reichard.

CREW MEMBER #4: "Manipulation." This word was heard from Mr. Kluge the moment the piece of paper landed on the table. If Mr. Kluge thinks that television is manipulated in this way, then it would be wrong not to show the program as it was recorded. At the same time, it's easy to produce schematic programs. They can be edited, manipulated. I'm not in favor of this. It would be a new approach, but a program should be

broadcast as it is, without interrupting it and trying to create a new program.

CREW MEMBER #5: I also think it should be shown as it is. This is a living program, the spoken word is broadcast, and nothing should be changed. And because we're producing a recording here, I want the recording to be shown. That's my opinion.

SCHMIDT: Do you think it's bad that Alexander walked in on the program?

CREW MEMBER #5: No. The program and the opinions that collide with one another are open for discussion. They must be discussed. And if, after an hour and a half, we haven't reached a conclusion, maybe it's necessary to go on discussing the topic with the same participants.

CREW MEMBER #4: May I? (Takes hold of the microphone again)

I'm not in favor of discussing the same things again. It's not a bad thing if someone joins a discussion, be it the director or anyone else—I'm for this, in principle. A program with the title *Open End* should not be shown with the manipulation of Mr. Kluge as he accused it of, but on the other hand, him wanting to produce the program again: that's not a program. Either we show it as it was, without deceiving the audience (and I don't think anyone can take command here), or assume power for different groups in the social order. My opinion is that the program should be shown as it is. If this doesn't happen, that would be manipulation.

CREW MEMBER #6: I think we can learn more from what we are doing here, showing this as it is, than from the entire discussion. That's what I think, because if we really show it, we refute the arguments that were made during the discussion, if we really show it like this.

SCHMIDT: Let's hope the director sees it that way.

ALEXANDER: I admit that, up to a few hours ago, I had a different opinion about it, because I believe that a discussion about whether this is positive or negative among experts can be very productive. Except that in this case, what I noticed during the discussion is that it's definitely more meaningful, more relevant for the audience, not to have something that could just as easily be printed in the form of an interview or an essay. Rather, it is more meaningful to reproduce the divergences which were here just as they emerged. I have to set priorities and know what is more important. Normally, it's very good for a discussion like this if the people who know about the topic have already expressed themselves, and are now sitting down together to explain it and produce something. Except that here probably not so much good material was produced, but at least the impression of the divergences was reproduced truthfully.

FALKENBERG: So let's try now to pick up again, or to go on spinning the distinguished threads of whatever color that escaped us, from the point where we left them.

As Kluge is at pains to make clear, the talk show in meltdown appears to be a uniquely productive place for television. Even when it attempts

to regain the composure of the talk show, the situation is irrevocably changed: the director acts as a panelist, the editors and grips join in, and good manners and time constraints are continually forsaken. John Brockman cynically declared that "the revolution ended" when his friend Abbie Hoffman, a guest on *The Merv Griffin Show* one week prior to Kluge's appearance on *Open End*, "shut up for the commercial break." But participation is nonetheless key to renovation; Kluge's desire to induce a television culture that is "bad" reduces the power of those mainstream value judgments. He seeks to gratify the viewer's desire to see what a wrong turn might look like by precariously producing the "non-program" through any means necessary. In the final moments of *Open End*, Kluge —always keen to have the last word—gives his permission to conclude the recording of the programming, signing off with a failure, but one clearly heralded as a private victory.

KLUGE: **Your program structure prevents us (a) from expressing ourselves at all, and (b) We can't get behind the camera. (Readjusts his**

glasses, twiddles his thumbs, leans forward) The topic of society cannot be dealt with in this form. It's too complicated.

There's something about Kluge's Mona Lisa smile in the delivery of this final line — something not quite as earnest as everything said before. Something less spirited, perhaps. To return to Leni Peikart's conception of a reformed circus with "socially relevant entertainment," the retrospective retitling of the program — from *Open End* to *Reformzirkus* — implicitly suggests that Leni's goal has, during the chaos of the talk show, been achieved. As the broadcast comes to a close and the fade-out is cued, the compulsion to neutralize and normalize the debate nonetheless persists. The host cannot help but return to his format, even as it ends. Falkenberg looks straight into the camera and says with a smile, "That's all for today."

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