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“The Future of the Past,” an Introduction

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Susanne Baackmann and Nancy P. Nenno

It is up to us to see the ever-changing futurity
of the past in constellation with the present.

– Anton Kaes, *The Future of the Past*

It is difficult to hold a conference in honor of someone who does not wish to be honored, and yet that is precisely what happened from Friday, 10 April, through Saturday, 11 April, 2015, on the top floor of Dwinelle Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. Despite protests from the man of the hour, thirteen former students, along with friends and colleagues of Professor Anton Kaes (Fig. 1)—including his long-time partner in all things German cinema, Eric Rentschler—and several current graduate students, gathered for the first Alumni Conference in the Department of German. Organized by Nina Berman, Noah Isenberg, Jennifer Kapczynski, and Barbara Kosta, “The Future of the Past” conference became a cross-generational event that demonstrated what we all had in common and what Nina Berman has so succinctly described as a “Tony Kaes approach to German Studies” (Berman, “Preface”).



Figure 1: Professor Anton Kaes.

At the close of the conference, Department Chair Professor Deniz Göktürk raised the possibility of dedicating part of an issue of the Department’s online journal *TRANSIT* (which was celebrating its tenth anniversary!) to the work that had been presented—and the synergies revealed—over the course of those two days. It was agreed that the papers

would not be full-fledged articles in the traditional sense, but rather more “thought pieces,” texts that would showcase the relationships between and among the projects presented. And, in fact, the work that these thirteen former students are pursuing in—and outside of—German Studies is stunningly diverse. From cinematic to televisual texts, from architecture to minority studies, from the Holocaust to contemporary Kenya and the United States, the definition of what belongs in the archive of German Studies was put to the test. And while the texts themselves may appear disparate, the approach to them demonstrates a shared belief in, and commitment to thematizing, the rootedness of each in both its present and its future. Although not all of the participants were able to share their papers for this collection, we hope that readers of these ten papers will nonetheless ascend 100 feet into the air and achieve the “bird’s-eye view” so favored by Tony Kaes.

Tony Kaes begins his 1987 publication *Deutschlandbilder. Die Wiederkehr der Geschichte als Film* with a statement that has all the qualities of the kind of opening sentence he considered to be the signature of good academic writing: short but incisive, succinct yet engaging and, maybe most importantly, seductively simple in its phrasing while provocatively multifaceted in its suggestiveness. “Es scheint unheimlich: Je weiter sich die Vergangenheit zeitlich entfernt, desto näher rückt sie” (5). This simple yet complex statement articulated three decades ago proved prescient since the process of mediating history through images, in particular the history of National Socialism, has only accelerated, intensified, and gained new dimensions since then. He continues:

Man braucht die Hitlerzeit nicht selbst erlebt zu haben, man weiss Bescheid: man kennt die Bilder über diese Zeit, authentische und nachgestellte. Das Gedächtnis wird in dem Maße öffentlich und kollektiv, in dem individuelles Erinnern von diesen Bildern überdeckt und beherrscht wird. Durch Bilder ist Geschichte demokratisiert worden, doch die Macht über die Geschichte ist in die Hände derer übergegangen, die diese Geschichts-Bilder produzieren. (5)

These insights still ring true, maybe with even more urgency today. Kaes’ reflection on the reach and the power of *Deutschlandbilder*, his recognition that the democratic dissemination of images is inevitably also a manipulation that deserves careful analysis, expresses a concern that also informed our symposium on *The Future of the Past*. In different ways, and in dialogue with a wide array of materials and contexts, the contributions presented here probe how future and past are in dialogue, sometimes rather overtly, sometimes more covertly. They examine emergent constellations between these two “discursive fields” past and future by thinking through our respective subject positions, perspectives, blind spots, and implications in the future of the past as scholars and teachers of German Studies yet also as individuals defined by different generational, historical, national, and ethnic markers.

We have grouped the essays rather loosely into three sections. The first section, Postmemory and the Archive, is concerned with both the possibilities and limitations of personal (Hwang) and aesthetically mediated subject positions (Baackmann) vis-à-vis the impasses of the Holocaust legacy, as well as representational strategies of ‘historical event television’ based on emotional affect (Hall). The second section, Reanimations, traces dialectical gestures of acknowledgement and repudiation in architectural (McFarland) and cinematic (Kosta) remakes. It also considers Dadaist attitudes towards the future as a subversive play with the economic forces of the day, speculation and profit

(Beals). The third section, Traveling Culture, explores structures of trans- and internationalism as played out in the 1920s cinema of Ernst Lubitsch (McCormick), the impact of German economic transactions on the Kenyan coast (Berman), takes stock of shifts and new epistemological focal points in Black German Studies (Nenno), and reevaluates the curriculum of German Studies in light of an increasingly diverse student body (Kopp).

Postmemory and the Archive

It seems uncanny. In the new millennium the future of the past seems to emerge in Germany as an inadvertent competition of empathy played out in arenas of what Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider have polemically called "Olympioniken der Betroffenheit." In their 2010 study *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, they lament a culture of commemoration that relies on empathic identification with the victim and fuels the concomitant hope for redemption. They question a "Gedenkkultur, die sich den widersprüchlichen und emotional ambivalenten Anteilen des Erinnerns kaum stellt, sondern ein auf Identifikation und Versöhnung ausgerichtetes Gedenken in den Mittelpunkt rückt" (29). In different ways, this problematic emotional proximity to the past is discussed in the first three contributions.

In June Hwang's essay, "I am not You: On the Need for Distance," our individual subject position and collective stance vis-a-vis history comes into focus as both an intransigent personal question and an impossibility. Reflecting on her own subject position as a Korean American scholar of German Studies as well as those of her students, Hwang poses the question of "how to build a relationship to, and an understanding of, a position that is not one's own, often involving great disparities in experience and power," particularly when it comes to teaching the Holocaust to American students. She comes to the conclusion that teaching this topic ultimately means precisely the opposite of empathetic fusion, namely to consider the process of understanding in light of a distance that can never be overcome but rather needs to be respected and made constructive.

The question of subject position as shaped by both an imagined proximity and the experience of distance also informs Susanne Baackmann's essay on "The Implicated Subject in Works by Rachel Seiffert and Cate Shortland." In light of a recent turn to the figure of the perpetrator in fiction and film, Baackmann raises the question of the extent to which the victim/perpetrator imaginary can be a constructive lens for understanding historical agency and its legacies across multiple generations. Her essay examines recent shifts in mnemonic perspective along the lines of Michael Rothberg's notion of the 'implicated subject.' Rothberg's nuanced reconceptualization of historical agency questions identificatory stances and honors paradoxes and impasses of historical subject positions.

Sara Hall's essay explores the most current 'return of history as film' in her contribution on "Contemporary German Historical Event-Television and the Implications of its Interactive Elements." She analyzes a new trend in German TV aesthetics dubbed "historical event television," along with new commemorative platforms, such as *Das Gedächtnis der Nation*, that register significant shifts in the interaction between the

public and historical facts and narratives. Coming back to Kaes’ observation that the wide dissemination of images both opened up and obscured perceptions of the past in new ways, Hall notes the “influx of previously unseen, crowd-sourced imagery” and its promise to counteract the homogenizing control of mass media. This promise of the ever-expanding accessibility, fluidity and range of these new media platforms is, however, countered by the fact that these sites reinforce traditional registers of representation and reception. In order to counter this tendency, Hall asserts that “transmedial storytelling must draw attention [...] to the constructedness of its elements and their embeddedness in the preexisting power dynamics.”

Reanimations

“Zombies are hot,” writes Kipp Davis. “Our escalating fascination with them over the course of the past decade says something of their sociological significance, pointing to a growing uneasiness about our self-security as a species, our survival, and, ultimately, our perception of the future [...]” (149). Each of the three essays in this section addresses issues that speak to our own current fascination with the return of the (un)dead, the return of the past in the present, and into the future. What is striking is that, in each case, the texts being examined—whether written or architectural—are created in the wake of a radical historical break, even an apocalypse: the First World War, the Second World War, and the reunification of the two Germanies.

In his contribution, Kurt Beals examines the way in which Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader explicitly thematized the apocalyptic tone of the early post-WWI period as a radical and decisive break from the past in their magazine. In “Dada Futures: Inflation, Speculation, and Uncertainty in *Der Dada* No. 1,” Beals argues that, rather than bemoaning the loss of a world now in tatters, *Der Dada* focused on the future, or rather on futures, by adopting an attitude of speculation. Whether economic or political, the metaphor of speculation, and hence gambling or gaming, becomes central to the magazine’s phenomenological stance. The multiple possible outcomes of any given moment are parodied and critiqued to the point where the only solid investment is, as Beals says, Dada—itself a fragmented, paratactic aesthetic venture.

Barbara Kosta’s essay, “When Texts Travel: Edward Dmytryk’s *The Blue Angel* (1950) Remake,” describes the resuscitation of Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* in the US in the early post-WWII period. “What happens,” she asks, “when the original is repurposed for another historical time period and cultural and national setting?” A product of the early Cold War period with its anxiety about Communism and the political expediency of Germany’s swift rehabilitation as an ally, Kosta argues that *The Blue Angel* as directed by Edward Dmytryk recuperates the masculinity and Germanness that the original destroys.

“Attack of the Cyberzombies: Media, Reconstruction, and the Future of Germany’s Architectural Past” is the only essay to explicitly reference the theme of reanimation of the undead. However, the zombies Rob McFarland addresses are not the “lurching, brain-hungry” variety, but rather the brick-and-mortar kind. Or are they? Drawing on theories of Medienarchitektur and Walter Benjamin’s *Kunstwerk* essay, McFarland analyzes the debate about the reconstruction of historical buildings in post-Wende Germany and its

invocation of an apocalyptic discourse that pits the past and historicity against the present and illusion.

Traveling Cultures

In her essay on "Black Studies in the 21st Century," Nancy Nenno asks pertinent questions that express concerns our symposium presented, explored, and probed. She writes, "Sometimes we wish that a particular past did not have a future. Moreover, as the symposium 'The Future of the Past' demonstrated, more often than not, the future of the past is ambivalent, multi-faceted, and occasionally volatile." She is referring, of course, to the tensions currently unfolding in Germany in the context of the migrant and refugee crisis, tensions that are bringing to the fore unacknowledged transnational and global dis-/connections, often but not necessarily linked to Germany's colonial history. Alluding to increasingly diverse diasporic communities in Germany, her article raises the question of racial and ethnic identity formation within a country such as Germany and how this history is shaping and reshaping the contours of the canon. Who is a Black German today, and how do we incorporate their texts into a "German Studies" archive?

These questions resonate deeply with Kristin Kopp's contribution "On Teaching the Pre-Modern History of Africans in Europe." Kopp opens by laying out the challenges we all face in light of decreasing enrollments and shifts in departmental and institutional priorities. She then describes a collaborative teaching project she has designed in collaboration with historian Jeff Bowersox that challenges the parameters and premises of discourses on race in the context of German Studies. By going back to the pre-modern period and tracing pathways that originated in Africa and extended into Europe, "Black Germany: The Cultural History of Africans and People of African Descent in the German-Speaking Lands from Antiquity to the Present" seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic mental map of Western culture—and concomitant power inequalities—in order to open paths for alternative conceptual frameworks of Blackness.

Conceptions of identity and agency also come into focus in Rick McCormick's contribution on silent cinema, "Ernst Lubitsch and the Transnational Twenties." McCormick argues that Lubitsch's first American film set in Germany, *The Student Prince of Old Heidelberg* (1927), is one of the first transnational cinematic projects and articulates innovative ethnic, gender, and sexual politics. He notes that this film is inflected on the one hand by the biography of its director, a German Jew who had to navigate various challenges of discrimination and migration. On the other hand, it invokes the biography of the film's star Ramón Novarro, who came to the US from Mexico and was a closeted gay actor firmly locked into the role of "Latin lover." Both the topic of impossible love and Novarro's nuanced but provocative performance bring into play normative notions of gender and love in what McCormick calls "elliptical and metaphorical" ways that speak to the film's transnational gestures.

Finally, in her essay on shifts from the colonial to the neoliberal, "German Agents of Tourism Development and Business in Diani, Kenya," Nina Berman traces the current face of transnationalism as it has emerged on the Kenyan coast over the past fifty years. Her contribution seeks to shed light on the role of Germans with respect to economic transactions in Kenya and the ongoing "processes of land alienation that began during the colonial period." Berman outlines to what degree current articulations of neoliberal

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capitalism are structuring transnational relationships and erasing local identity formations and traditions. This kind of economic hegemony is reinforcing asymmetries of power and identity that need to be both questioned and challenged in order to mobilize a vision for the future that is informed by the past in innovative and constructive ways.

Just as Tony Kaes repeatedly returns to one of his “teachers” in the field of German cinema studies, Siegfried Kracauer, so too do his students repeatedly return to the leitmotifs of his teaching (Fig. 2). The essays here—which are just a sampling of the work being produced by Tony’s students—pursue the same aesthetic and ethical questions as Tony Kaes does in his most recent book, *Shell Shock Cinema*. Even when the object of study is not film, the goals of these analyses are to study texts “as entities that arise from and exist in concrete historical moments; that supply aesthetic responses to economic, social, political, ideological, and institutional determinants; and that still resonate with us today” (6).



Figure 2: Alumni participants (and Eric Rentschler) at “The Future of the Past” conference.

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