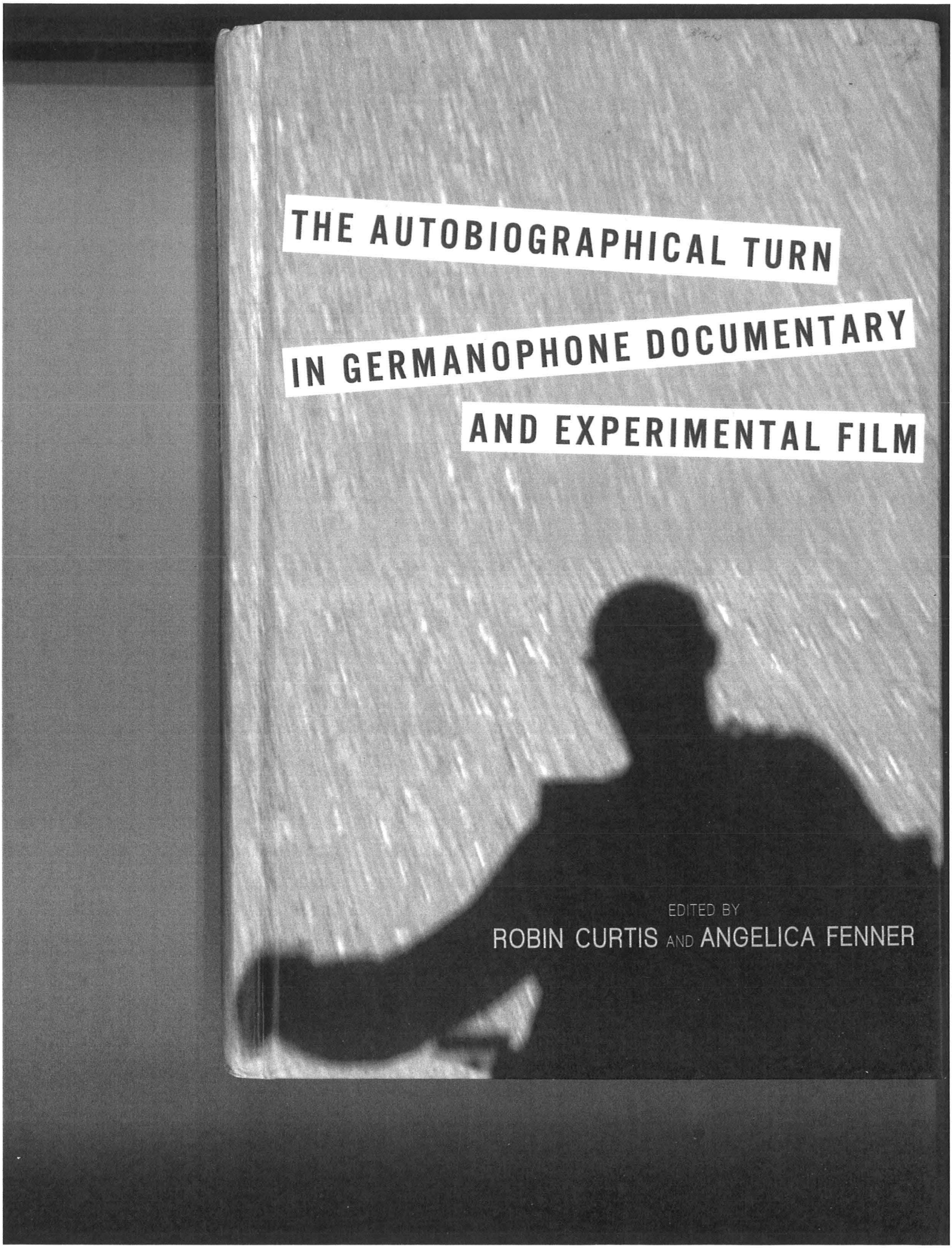
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TURN
IN GERMANOPHONE DOCUMENTARY
AND EXPERIMENTAL FILM
EDITED BY
ROBIN CURTIS AND ANGELICA FENNER

2: The Impertinence of Saying "I": Sylvia Schedelbauer's Personal Documentaries

Christopher Pavsek

As a practicing filmmaker, I have had conversations with numerous documentarians over the past decade, and cannot help but get the feeling that the personal or autobiographical documentary has, in some ways, become a convenient form, one which solves several difficult problems that face documentary practitioners today. For one, the problem of "access" is overcome: you no longer have the difficult and patient work of establishing contacts with your subject and gaining their trust, and you no longer have to engage in the tedious process of securing access to certain places, people, or things. And this access comes with fewer of the messy "ethical" issues that seem so fundamental to the sober discourse of documentary film.[1] The self becomes, for many personal documentarians, a last refuge of the authentic, a final place where the language of authenticity can still "responsibly" be used without offense to an "other."

When thinking about personal documentaries, however, especially examples of the genre that are circulating these days on the international festival circuit, it might be useful to recall Theodor Adorno's classic, and notorious, line from Part One of *Minima Moralia*: "In many people it is already an impertinence to say I."[2] I do not mean to cite this quote as a slight against autobiographical films per se, be they from Germany or elsewhere, but instead as a prompt to rethink, in the broadest possible terms, the historical determinants of the form. This section of *Minima Moralia* was written in 1944, while Adorno was in exile in the United States, and its implied critique of "many people" was aimed both at Nazi (and perhaps Stalinist) assaults on individual subjectivity as well as at the evacuation of the subject under the weight of the American culture industry and tendentially universalized commodification. Nevertheless, it remains utterly apt for our own historical moment, when the pressures on the human subject and its integrity can only be said to have increased exponentially. The turn toward the first person, the personal and the autobiographical in film and video production and in international film culture more generally, can perhaps be understood

as a reaction to the general evacuation of the subject that Adorno so perspicaciously analyzed in much of his work, constituting a sort of effect of the ruse of history: precisely at the moment when it disappears, the subject wants to celebrate itself and invest itself with new meaning. The "impertinence" in saying "I" in autobiographical documentaries lies, then, not only in the presumption that one might still have the status of an authentic subject, the presumption that one *deserves* to be called a subject as such, but it also lies in the avoidance of the "other" as a possible subject of representation or discussion. To put it provocatively: to speak only of one's self is the impertinence.

In the quest for authenticity many personal documentaries in the international arena seem compelled to turn increasingly to techniques "borrowed" from fiction film, including, for example, a greater emphasis on compelling narrative structure with dramatic plot lines, "well-developed" characters, and the creation of emotional "hooks," whose effects are all to be carefully scrutinized and confirmed through test screenings and audience surveys; this situation is increasingly characteristic of documentary production more generally.[3] In doing so, a personal documentary can find itself trapped in a paradox, a formal impasse in which the reified forms of three-act narratives, emotional manipulation, and historical revision are the vehicles to greater authenticity. On the one hand, this seems the logical result of the long history of theoretical reflections on the documentary image and its claims to veracity; if no adequate image of the real can be created, if the fantasy of cinema's direct and unmediated access to the real has been discredited, then all sorts of formal possibilities make themselves available and seem permissible. On the other, hand, though, this problematic points toward a larger issue: that a unique life's course, a unique biography, must be told in familiar, if not clichéd, forms, as the token of admission to the symbolic order. This familiarity of form reinforces the ultimate gesture of the genre, namely, that in narrating an authentic individual and unique tale one is expressing something ultimately universal, the sort of universal that gets mouthed in the voiceovers for Hollywood film trailers: that love and the human spirit will triumph, that "love is hard," that in the end, no matter how conflicted our upbringing, "family" is about love and belonging, that in the end we are "all human," etc. To turn to Adorno again, as he points out in *Negative Dialectics*, it is further evidence that what is transcendental in the human subject is the emerging universality of the commodity form under globalization. The individual biography or autobiography achieves this universality only in its presentation in a (falsely) universal and deeply commodified form: that of the classic Hollywood narrative.

Another way Adorno might formulate this would be to say that this move to "fictionalize" the individual biography while retaining the rhetorical framework of the documentary mode is one more way in which

the individual is subject to determination from "without" by "objective forces."[4] Individuation then becomes one avenue along which the objective tendencies of rationalization, commodification, and instrumentalization of reason and culture express themselves. As such, the poignant celebration of the individual subject, although comprising an understandable flight from determination from without, also participates unwittingly in the further evacuation of what Adorno understood as an autonomous individuality, one he deemed distinguishable from the faux individuality promoted under late capitalism. It becomes another way in which society expresses itself as the substance of the individual. The irony here is not to be missed: in the narcissistic display of the personal documentary a profoundly social substance finds its expression. Again, to use Adorno's language: to "speak immediately of the immediate," as this genre often claims to do, is to present people as if "they could still act as subjects and as if something depended on their actions."[5] Or, as Slavoj Žižek might put it, in terms directly relevant to my ensuing discussion of a particular autobiographical film from Germany, the ultimate result of "global subjectivization" (Žižek's keyword for the postmodern tendency to reject great ideological causes and focus on self-reinvention and "in new forms of . . . subjective practices") is that subjectivity itself is destroyed.[6] When it turns to the techniques and codes of classical narrative, the personal documentary celebrates the individual subject in a form that is ultimately testament to its dissolution. This accounts, perhaps, for the embarrassment one often feels when watching some personal documentaries, as if what was on display was forced and inauthentic, a far too great protestation of the subject's significance and authenticity.

I do not mean to suggest that my perhaps exaggerated portrayal of autobiographical documentaries, which clearly masks the significant variation in the form, accurately characterizes the tradition of the autobiographical film in Germany, to the extent that such a tradition exists; this characterization more readily applies to North American documentary than to German film and video.[7] Nonetheless, this tendency increasingly forms the backdrop against which international film production takes place and provides a determinant context as significant as any specific national context or tradition from which a particular film might emerge and in which a particular filmmaker might be working.[8] Moreover, the landscape of documentary film production and exhibition is increasingly international: a German documentary or experimental filmmaker is as likely to draw her influences from Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ross McElwee, Kim Longinotto, or Errol Morris as she is from Helke Sander, Claudia von Alemann, or Werner Herzog (not to mention popular fiction filmmakers); she is also as likely to find an outlet for her work in Amsterdam, Toronto, or Yamagata as she is in Leipzig or Oberhausen, to cite the locations of significant festivals on the international circuit.[9] Reception has

become similarly internationalized, and as a result, the expectations that audiences bring to films are now conditioned by a set of generic determinants emerging from no single national tradition.

The filmmaker Sylvia Schedelbauer presents a compelling challenge to any attempt to easily situate her and her work within a particular national tradition or context. Her own biography defies easy categorization within a singular national identity, a fact that has created real difficulties for her sense of self-understanding and personal identity and that her first film, *Erinnerungen* (Germany, 2004), directly, if mutedly, confronts. She grew up in Tokyo as the child of a German father who emigrated to Japan in the years of the German economic miracle and a Japanese mother who in her teens fled what she felt were the confines of traditional Japanese rural life. Though not directly revealed in her film, it is worth noting that Schedelbauer is trilingual, speaking German and Japanese, as well as English, with no particular accent, and she has long regarded American culture as her own, forming a sort of third "surrogate identity" she desired as a consequence of her lack of assimilation to either German or Japanese culture. She first began living in Germany as a young adult, and has since then also returned to live in Tokyo; she currently divides her time between Berlin and the United States. Her first film, though made in Germany and clearly made for a German audience, has had as many screenings outside of Germany as within, and its "Germanness" will be even further muted in the English language version, which she recently completed. Furthermore, as she herself has said, the film was not made with any real sense of its belonging to any particular national film tradition, be it German, Japanese, or American.[10] None of this is meant to deny the continued existence of the cultural specificity of German film, but rather to expand the frame of that specificity and account, at least to an extent, for the place of a filmmaker with German ties within a broadly international context.

To return to my earlier citation of Žižek, national identity itself is one of the ideological causes that is no longer available to Schedelbauer as a subject (and as a filmmaker). The desire for such a cause, much like her desire for a surrogate American identity, is a symptom of the subjective deadlock in which she finds herself as someone shaped by several cultures but not really at home in any. Compellingly, her first film *Erinnerungen*, which employs in truncated form a number of the formal strategies familiar from North American personal documentaries, concludes with a longing reference to just such out-of-vogue grand causes that provide sites of collective identification. These causes, however, remain out of her reach; she is unable to find the solace and significance that they would provide. The film, however, also refuses to allow the narrator-protagonist to find refuge and meaning in the sort of individualized subjective practices that Žižek so assiduously criticizes. Neither the dissolution of the individual

subject in a collective project nor the "life in death,"[11] as Žižek puts it, of pure subjective involution (an obsessive concern with the self that forecloses the possibility of anything "real" ever happening to the individual) are held out as viable options; instead, the film concludes with the tension between these two options unresolved and irresolvable. *Erinnerungen* travels an interesting path to get to this point.

This "untraditional family history," as the film has been described,[12] consists entirely of still images (until the closing credits) accompanied by Schedelbauer's voice-over narration, and unfolds like a livingroom slide show of family photographs. It is broken down into six sections, each separated by a few seconds of silent, black screen. The first section deals with the narrator's German paternal grandfather, a soldier during the Second World War. The second section is devoted to the narrator's father, a German, and his life in postwar Germany. The third section covers his move to Japan in the late fifties. The fourth portrays the father's life with his wife, the narrator's mother, who is Japanese, and the narrator's own childhood. A fifth section concerns the narrator's thoughts about her family and her upbringing, told seemingly from the perspective of young adulthood. This is followed by a concluding section comprised solely of a brief voice-over and scrolling text, about which I will say more in due time.

The film opens with a black frame accompanied by a first-person voice-over delivered in a phlegmatic, dispassionate female voice—a voice that already points toward a certain subjective dearth on the part of the narrator. She tells of finding a small photo album in a shoebox as a fourteen year old. On its cover, she tells us, was the label "*Erinnerungen*" (memories). An image of this cover fades in to reveal the label, carefully framed to fill the full width of the screen. The authority and veracity of the narration is confirmed by the image, even if the narrator tells us that this album is "a relic of a time unimaginably alien" to her.

But this shot is followed by a cross-dissolve to a wider framing that reveals, above the label "*Erinnerungen*," a silver eagle clutching a swastika in its talons. The narrator explains that the symbol makes her feel like she "was doing something forbidden"; it gave her the feeling that what she "would discover in there must have come from a despicable time." The transition between the two shots immediately sets the stage for a cliché, a cliché that in the context of a German family has potentially ominous overtones: what will unfold here is yet another exploration of a familial past, the excavation of memories that have been repressed, left undiscussed and undisclosed. We seem set up to witness another attempt to unearth the "family secret" that is the object-cause of desire in many personal family documentaries—a discovery that would surely lead to a fully anticipatable surprise.[13] The dissolve at this point seems to shift the film and this search into the realm of melodrama—all that is missing is a dramatic score to emphasize the import of the moment.

But that score is missing. In fact, the film has no musical track whatsoever and refuses to augment the dramatic import of any of its moments with audible emotional cues. Its only audio is the monotone voice-over of the narrator herself. Instead of grasping the opportunity presented by this apparent narrative hook, the narrator goes on to share only the most schematic information about her grandfather, to whom this box of "memories" belonged: her reticent father has only told her that the grandfather had died in Stalingrad. He was apparently ("*es soll sein*") an unemployed photographer from the Berlin district of Moabit when the Nazis came to power. The narrator says: "I figured out the rest from history books. I was disappointed he hadn't belonged to the resistance." Images from the box are shown, typical wartime images of German soldiers standing at attention, soldiers smiling sleepily in their barracks, cleaning their boots, etc. The narrator continues, admitting to "reproachful" feelings toward a grandfather whom she had never known and about whom she knows virtually nothing. She can only speculate about the significance of these images for her grandfather. At one point in this montage, the narrator suddenly changes tone and says: "The images, witnesses of a collective memory. At the same time, in his handwriting he claimed the images to be his own. As if his time in the military was something he wanted to keep as a positive memory, like a vacation with friends, or an outing with the family. As if the moments frozen in the photos were supposed to bring him pleasure in later days." There is no commentary until the very end of this sequence about the repression that this "pleasure" must be built on: no comment on how the camaraderie of the soldiers in the photos betrays no evidence of the complicities of the Wehrmacht in the commission of war crimes during the Second World War; the narrator expresses no judgment. By the time of this film's production, such a remark would have been obvious, redundant. As with its refusal to follow the narrative hook that inaugurates this scene, the film refuses to repeat the familiar gesture. Instead, the narration proceeds by way of an unacknowledged quote from Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance*,[14] one that addresses in general terms the nature of memory and recollection:

> I imagine the feelings of two people meeting again after many years. In the past they were friends, and therefore they think they are linked by the same experience, the same recollections. The same recollections? That's where the misunderstanding starts: they don't have the same recollections; each of them retains two or three small scenes from the past, but each has his own; their recollections are not similar; they don't intersect; and even in terms of quantity they are not comparable: one person remembers the other more than he is remembered; first because memory capacity varies among individuals (an explanation that each of them would at least find acceptable), but also (and this is more painful to admit) because they don't hold the same importance for each other.[15]

The passage contains a warning about the project of constructing collective memory: the lack of shared recollections and the lack of a shared sense of those recollections' significance, even among people with the same historical experience, present a blockage to collectivity. The quote seems to imply that these men whom we see in the grandfather's photos, even though they seem to be smiling in warm camaraderie, share little, if anything, memorable in these photographs, even if they are still alive. At this moment, the film calls into question any hope of constructing a historical subjectivity grounded in the recollection of collective experience.

The documents the film presents, the many images gathered and portrayed from this box of memories, cannot, then, really serve as the "witnesses of a collective memory." Nor do they offer the narrator anything that could constitute a "discovery"; no secrets can be found here, no hidden pasts, no prior unacknowledged complicity of her grandfather in historical events. All the narrator can say, in rather awkward terms, is that her grandfather and the rest of the soldiers in the photos, from whom she cannot even distinguish her grandfather because she has no idea what he looks like, "had fought on the German front line in the Second World War and were responsible for the loss and agony of millions of people." The remark seems to be an implicit reference to the heated debates in Germany about the role of the Wehrmacht in the Second World War that unfolded in the wake of the controversial 1995 exhibition *The War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941–44* curated by the historian Hannes Heer, whose documentation, consisting of photographs taken by soldiers, debunked the durable myth in postwar Germany that the Wehrmacht had not been responsible for any atrocities during the war.[16] But the tone of Schedelbauer's remark, and its vague generality, betrays no sense of the contentiousness of the topic, no sense of the grandfather's specific role in the war or in the Wehrmacht's crimes. Even the intimacy of kinship guarantees no special access to the history captured in these images. This little private archive, which the narrator discovers one day while digging through her father's closet without permission, offers up images as alien and distant as any anonymous historical images: "He was just as alien to me as his colleagues. I could have just as easily found these pictures in a history book."

The ambiguity of this latter sentence—"I could have just as easily found these pictures in a history book"—points to the heart of what I understand to be Schedelbauer's project. On the one hand it can be understood to rehearse a gesture familiar from personal documentaries, one that asserts one can best know the universal or the whole by way of a detour through the particular and the individual. From this perspective, then, the quote would assert that these images that emerge from the narrator's family history are as authoritative as any official documentation of the Nazi period. They possess the same evidentiary status as the sorts of

historical documents one finds in seemingly less subjective accounts such as "history books." If that were the case, the "alienness" of her grandfather, his unrecognizability, the distance that attains between the image and the object it represents, would be a narrative prompt, a small crisis for the film to overcome and resolve in a narrative of personal and familial discovery. One could easily imagine the tale this would initiate: "So I set off to find my grandfather. Little did I realize what lay hidden beneath the surface of these images," and so on. In this case the film would also repeat a classic element of the personal narrative, which, upon closer examination, usually combines two distinct if related stories. First, there is the narrative of the family/self that unfolds: "My grandfather was born, he did this and did that and this had such and such an effect on me." This story constitutes the manifest content of the film and consists of the attempt to restore some continuity to a narrative that has been ruptured or thwarted in its unfolding in historical time. This story is usually accompanied by a second narrative, namely, a story of the discovery of these facts, the tale of the research and digging that went on to create the first narrative. This second narrative then reinforces the first, adding to its authority and veracity while simultaneously taking over as the dominant narrative of the film. At least in the American context, the personal documentary about the family is, in the end, usually a documentary of the personal journey and transformation of the filmmaker.[17] Much like an annoying friend who always manages to turn the conversation back to him- or herself, this second narrative usurps the first.

To an extent, *Memories* starts off by following this pattern: the narrator begins to tell the tale of her grandfather as well as to describe the process of discovering the truth about him. But both narratives are truncated and blocked, cut short and thwarted. She opens the box and looks at the pictures; she does no other research. She cannot even identify him in the images, never having "bothered" to find out which person he was. What she learns about her grandfather from these images is, in the end, absolutely nothing beyond mere appearance: he wore those clothes, the weather was or was not clear, the fields were muddy or dry. Which leads to the other possible meaning of this ambiguous sentence in *Memories*. The sentence could also be understood to assert that the images she found in her grandfather's box of memories were as "alien" to her as any anonymous images of historical events that one can find in a "history book." And what the narrator discovers in the course of the film is that all events in her family history, including the experiences of her parents as well as her own experience, are marked by a similar alienness and anonymity that cannot be overcome.

As such, then, *Erinnerungen* diverges markedly from some of the basic presuppositions underlying the personal family documentary film as it has been theorized in Anglo-American film criticism. Michael Renov,

for example, in writing about "the (American) Jewish autobiographical film," identifies some salient formal features that characterize autobiographical film more generally: the films often structure themselves around a "family secret," the familial past is a source of understanding of the present-day "identity" of the autobiographical cinematic auteur, and "home" and "family" (used without any article) are places of "great intimacy" where the "domestic ethnographer," Renov's term for the personal autobiographical filmmaker, conducts "extended fieldwork." The "mother lode" for this ethnographer is the home movie and photo album that provide the raw materials for a deep-digging, historical reexamination of the past.[18]

However, though the film begins with the discovery of just such a trove of documents and raw materials that will initiate its domestic ethnographic investigation of the family's history, the family secret is left undisclosed in *Erinnerungen*.[19] What is discovered, or rather confirmed, is that little is known about the grandfather. Instead of leading to some sort of personal redefinition and self-specification on the part of the narrator, the research into the past leads to further confusion at worst and a continued state of nonclarity at best. And "family" and "home" appear neither as sites of intimacy and authenticity nor as sites where some greater understanding about the past might be achieved, be it in the form of family history or a broader social and political history unlocked through the perspective of that family history. Instead, "family" and "home" mark sites of distance, alienation, and an even further estrangement from history. The photos discovered in the box labeled "memories" are far from a mother lode of historical documents; instead they are a series of opaque, neutral, resistant images that seem to assert ever more insistently that this man, the grandfather, and his moment in history will remain forever out of the narrator's reach, useless in the project of self-reconstruction/construction she seems on the verge of undertaking.

One might assume that the narrator is on the verge of achieving greater proximity to her subject when she begins in the second and third section to address her parents' lives following the Second World War. After all, she knows them personally and has been able, as an adult, to ask them questions about their lives. But *Erinnerungen* does not, in the end, "provide . . . an opportunity for the filmmaker to get to know his or her parents, to finally hear a detailed account of private life in a historical context that had otherwise remained particularly incomprehensible," as do most other German documentaries on the Third Reich and its aftereffects, which expose the filmmaker's family to "(non-fictional) filmic scrutiny."[20] The feeble efforts the narrator does make to achieve such intimacy or biographical detail, however, produce few results. Her parents do not participate onscreen beyond their appearance in old family photographs; they are not interviewed and what information they do provide is

relayed only second- or thirdhand by the voice-over in the form of recollections of past conversations.

In the transition to the topic of her parents, there is little attempt on Schedelbauer's part to assert some causal or determinant link between the grandfather and father's generation. The shift in focus is announced by a brief black frame and a voice-over giving the barest details of the father's early biography: he was born to poor parents on December 31, 1933, and little more. The narrator then digresses into another citation of Kundera's *Ignorance*, again unattributed, one which continues the critique of memory begun in the first Kundera passage, cited above. In this passage, after calling for a critique of "human memory as such," the narrator continues:

> For after all, what can memory actually do, the poor thing? It is only capable of retaining a paltry little scrap of the past, and no one knows why just this scrap and not some other one, since in each of us the choice occurs mysteriously, outside our will or our interests. We won't understand a thing about human life if we persist in avoiding the most obvious fact: that a reality no longer is what it was when it was; it cannot be reconstructed.

If we accept this as a methodological statement on the part of the film's enunciator, it would appear to call into question the overall project of the personal family documentary, supposedly grounded in the excavation of a past. The first passage from Kundera called into question the possibility of a *collective* memory: the inescapable isolation of the individual recollecting subject constitutes an insuperable blockage. In the current passage, the critique goes even further: even individual memory is utterly compromised and fragmented, subject to the incomprehensible vagaries of the psyche and the fragmentary nature of experience itself, and incapable of any substantive "reconstruction" of the past.

This reflection on memory puts the narrator's father's subsequent complaints into a very different light. The father, born as he was in 1933, was a recipient of that "blessing of a late birth" (*Gnade der späten Geburt*), as Helmut Kohl had so notoriously called it,[21] avoiding both the suspicion of adult complicity as well as the risks of the front; her father was thirteen years of age when the war ended. He was, however, a member of the Hitler Youth and refuses, according to the narrator, to speak of these past experiences. When she asked about his time in the Hitler Youth, "he cut me short" (Er fuhr mir über den Mund) and "burst into one of his choleric fits." He clearly has something to hide, or has an awareness of some repression that is going on; this is perhaps the only place in the film that alludes to the possibility that either parent's behavior might belie unconscious motivations. But the father went on to complain that the narrator should not "ask silly questions. He had forgotten his childhood." Though the narrator could not herself imagine forgetting

her own experiences from a similar period of her youth, the Kundera passage just cited adds a certain legitimacy and plausibility to the father's claim. Who is to say what the father might or might not have retained in his memory, no matter the nature of the past experience or the difficulties that their recollection might induce in the present? Only later, when both the narrator and the father were much older, did he offer some small scraps of his recollections, told in a "matter-of-fact" tone as if they "were a short synopsis on the dust jacket of a book." The narration suggests that the lack of affect is utterly incongruous with the memories he recounts:[22] his "mother and grandmother had been raped several times by Russian soldiers in their kitchen"; his relatives, despite his immediate family's poverty, refused to share any scraps of food, so he cut off all ties with them; work was scarce in Berlin, so he moved to Düsseldorf, and so on. As a twenty-five year old, having worked hard, his company sent him to Japan; he left Germany "before the Berlin Wall had been built."

The drama of these years—the Hitler period and the decade of the *Wirtschaftswunder*—is all left unarticulated, barely mentioned in an account lacking the emotional charge otherwise characteristic of many accounts of the period. The Berlin Wall and the division of Germany seem to have had little place in this man's life course and are essentially ignored by the film. The generic expectations of the narration of a family secret, as well as of some sort of emphatic "coming to terms" with the German past, are all sidestepped. The lack of affect in the father's account is repeated in the narrator's: the second section of the film ends almost abruptly, with a short set of black frames, having recounted the father's account with cool detachment.

The third section of the film is devoted to the parents' life in Japan and continues the by now familiar tone of narration. And again, none of the generic expectations of the personal family documentary are met: the narrator has no idea how her mother made ends meet after moving from her provincial Japanese town to Tokyo at the age of seventeen; the circumstances of her parents' meeting remain a mystery, despite the apparent narrative hooks that lead the viewer to speculate that her mother was a prostitute. But even this suspicion just fades away and is not pursued, abandoned as a moment just as inconsequential as any other.

Similarly, in a move perhaps unexpected in a contemporary personal documentary, where themes of cultural particularity and hybridity are generally common currency, there is virtually no exploration of the cultural difference that attains between the father and the mother (nor, later, is there even the slightest discussion of the narrator's own intercultural positioning). The father was "welcome as a German in the land of the rising sun," but admitted to having no interest in learning the language or participating in "Japanese traditions." The Japanese, too, seemed uninterested in Japanese traditions and were "making an effort

to leave behind their own culture and to pick up fashionable Western lifestyles." The mother seems to have been exemplary in this regard, wishing to live an "un-Japanese life" after having fled her patriarchal home, where all the children were given boys' names and an arranged marriage. These two details are the closest the film comes to specifying Japanese cultural particularity in anthropological or culturalist terms. Otherwise, familial details are not details, but rather generalities perhaps also familiar from school textbooks: her province offered little more than rice and tobacco fields; the grandfather died in an unspecified "famous battle during World War II."

The only really salient detail that the film provides about her mother's cultural background is that the region from which she came was known for its "folkloristic tales," which might be "the reason why my mother came up with new versions of a story every time she told one." Of course this detail, much like the earlier account of the father's "choleric fits," hints at some repressed biographical detail or lie, but it, too, is quickly left behind; there is no pondering as to its deeper significance. Instead, the narration digresses once again into semi-philosophical reflection taken from the pages of Kundera's *Ignorance*, and, once again, it reads like a direct commentary on the parents' lives:

> When two people live in the same apartment, see each other every day, and also love each other, their daily conversations bring their two memories into line: by tacit and unconscious consent they leave vast areas of their life unremembered, and they talk time and time again about the same few events out of which they weave a joint narrative that, like a breeze in the boughs, murmurs above their heads and reminds them constantly that they have lived together.

Such a life together, one so utterly reduced and leveled, as if by some necessity bound to the form of existence of the married couple, offers little material on which to base a compelling film narrative. The passage seems to foreclose even the remote possibility of trying to pry open the lid on the parents' collective past. If, as in other personal films, there were diaries to be discovered, or relatives to be interviewed, or even more old boxes of photos to be opened, the documentary material they would offer up would be as gray and anonymous as anything these exceedingly reticent and tight-lipped parents had to offer.

Some comments on the status of these citations in *Erinnerungen* are perhaps in order at this point. Their origin is only indicated after the fact in the closing credits; there is no indication in the voice-over of which passages are citations and which original. Only a sensitivity to the difference in tone and the level of seriousness and degree of abstraction in the language allows the viewer to guess, and most viewers seem not to notice at all.[23] This suggests that the particular provenance of the quotes

is not especially important here; they do not function as "references" to Kundera or advance any sort of citation of Kunderian philosophy of memory, if that is the term for it, which *Ignorance* puts forward (say, for example, as one might openly cite a specifically Marxian philosophy of history or a Nietzschean theory of power). They do not set out to consciously evoke the historical context of the novel, nor do they try to strike connections to Kundera's own political or personal situation. Instead, they are blank citations, so to speak, devoid of the authority associated with their author's name and the context in which they were written, which rise to the level of metacommentary on the unfolding film. It is a commentary, however, that is borrowed, as if plucked ready-made from a shelf of available thoughts selected for their appropriateness to the occasion. It is tempting to read these passages as a form of postmodern pastiche, but they have more of a "vocation" than pastiche would seem to have, at least in Jameson's understanding of the term.[24] For the quotes comment on the occurrences in the film and, further, can also be read as a formal allegory of the narrator's life and the lives of her family, as if the film expects no more from itself (and its narrator) in terms of originality than it does from her parents.

Indeed, the narrator does not seem to judge her parents for their own mundane existences, existences that would have fit in well in the "affluent American society of the sixties," as she puts it. Since they never lived in the United States, the remark stands more as a marker of the generic character of their lives; she seems to accept without the least reproach the utter reduction of their experience together that the Kundera passage points toward. That they make it their "duty" (*Pflicht*) to "acquire consumerist values" and do so quite well does not disturb her in the least. They first acquire a nice home, a color TV, a car, and then a second car, and "finally, two children" (as if they were no different than any other commodity acquisition). And this is exactly how the narrator herself is introduced into the film's narrative, with all the drama and tension of an item being added to a shopping list.

At this point, the film turns more autobiographical; its narrative directly concerns the narrator's childhood and adolescence, but its tone remains unchanged. That she narrates her own personal experience seems to offer no greater intimacy or "access"; the story is told almost as if she were narrating another person's life. The still images we are shown of her life—kissing her first boyfriend, an American sailor, a night out in Tokyo—many of which are out of focus and poorly lit—could have been taken from a "history book," much as she said about her grandfather's photographs. During this sequence, the film shows several stock photos of American naval ships, as if the narrative of the narrator's immediate personal life could not account for everything. A visual detour into the external world, into those objective forces that determine life "from

without," as Adorno might put it, has suddenly become necessary. It is as if the film becomes aware that the autobiographical account, and the personal documents on which it is based, can only be self-sufficient by force of a foreclosure of a larger, more social and objective (in the philosophical sense) set of concerns. This sudden, if subtle, rupture of the personal narrative anticipates a similar and more dramatic turn at the conclusion of the film, to which I will return in a moment.

It is at this point that the film transitions, again by a brief set of black frames, to its fifth and penultimate section. Here, at the film's denouement, instead of coming to terms with the narrator's past or finding some resolution to the apparent mysteries or solutions to family secrets that have thus far only tentatively and superficially been recounted—solutions that, in many personal family documentaries, usually find the protagonist settling into a kind of comfortable identity—the narration precipitously and unsettlingly changes tone. The narrator acknowledges that she suffered from "aggressive internal conflicts," "perhaps because she could not cut off contact with her parents" even though she wanted to. But instead of pursuing the causes of this conflict and coming to some deeper understanding, if not resolution, as one might expect, the narrator instead simply says: "I wished I'd been a student in the sixties because I could've joined a movement that had grown out of a background similar to mine. I wish I could've been a student in the seventies because I longed for the coherence of the hippies." In other words, she expresses a longing for the sort of collective ideological cause that Žižek speaks of, as I noted earlier in this essay. Yet such causes remain out of her reach, as do the other options Žižek mentions, namely, those individualized "subjective practices" symptomatic of the "global subjectivization" characteristic of the postmodern, including the comfortable narrative form of the personal family history.

Instead, all that seems to remain is an almost pure subjective destitution, a space evacuated of passion, affect, and intent; there is no "narrative arc," no goal, no future resolution, not even a poignant acceptance of her damaged state. The narrator seems too tired to explore any further the avenues that the family photos she has shown us have opened up. But at least in this minimal accounting that the film has provided up to this point, there is a trace of the damage that has been done to this subject; there is a sense of the deep wound that comes with the sort of subjective leveling (*Nivellierung* in Adorno) that the film effectively narrates in its inability to narrate anything else. To return to Adorno again: the evacuation of the historically constituted autonomous subject was to be bemoaned, no matter how compromised that subject was by its emergence and formation in the guise of individualism in the bourgeois epoch. But even in the face of its disintegration, the idea of an autonomous subject remains useful for critical theory. On the one hand, in the process of

its passing it remains the trace of a historical trauma, evidence of a historical wound; in its "decay" (*Verfall*), it is testimony to its own eradication. As Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia*, in a critique of psychoanalysis, it is only the "intuition of the age-old wound" that "contains the hope of a better future" (66; translation modified); in the maintenance of the however muted awareness of this wound is where *Erinnerungen* finds its moment of political effect. The awareness of suffering contains an ethical imperative, demanding its surpassing: "Weh spricht: vergeh."[25] This ethic is bound to an epistemological capacity in suffering, including that particular suffering associated with the disintegration of the unified subject; this suffering remains an experience from which one could gain a perspective on the overwhelming objective forces arrayed against the idea of the subject: as Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia* again, "the splinter in the eye is the best magnifying glass" (50).

A perspective such as this helps us come to terms with the provocative and wholly unexpected conclusion to *Erinnerungen*. After the narrator confesses her longing for some cause with which she might have been able to align herself in the past, the screen goes black and the narrator recounts: "In history class, once, the sentence was uttered: After the Second World War the world had enjoyed the longest period of peace—in the sense of armistice—in the history of humanity." She then notes that if she looks on the Internet, she finds endless lists of wars. And as she speaks a credit listing those countless wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—including the "postwar" period—begins to unroll on screen in alphabetical order, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. The list, she claims, makes her realize how far her "reality" lies from "other realities," and that though "documentary films, war photography, and reportage may claim [her] emotions and feed [her] with information and help her formulate [her] political views," they will do nothing to "change the fact that war is a state unimaginably alien to [her]." Her voice-over stops, and the rolling title card takes more than two minutes to unfold in total silence.

Despite the narrator's perhaps politically correct embarrassment at having been spared the grim realities others endured, the force of this closing gesture lies in the fact that no matter how "alien" these wars might be (as "alien" or "strange" as her grandfather remains after her timid exploration of his "memories"), they still have overwhelming determinant effects on her as a human being, and not merely because she, as the child of parents born during war, has biographical or family historical ties to the history of war. That the film eschews any images at this point and resorts to this almost neutral presentation of the simplest of facts—dates and places of wars with little specification as to their causes, horrors, death tolls, immediate political consequences, and so on—seems to me wholly appropriate. The film concludes with a moment of radical externality, a moment where it leaves behind both its skeletal narrative and its

immersion in images to make a gesture toward the crude and brute fact of the omnipresence of war. There cannot be images at this point: again the film makes a gesture here toward something outside of its own method of representation. It refuses to attempt to incorporate this collective horror and overwhelming objectivity into the even attenuated version of a personal cinematic narrative that has played out in the first parts of the film.

This is not a failure on the part of *Erinnerungen*. To return one last time to Adorno, one could think of this in terms analogous to an aspect of Adorno's method, namely, the tendency of his abstract philosophizing to suddenly come to a halt and unexpectedly lapse into a "vulgar-sociological reference"[26] and brutally point toward the crude facticity of the material world. It is an Adornian version of Brecht's "*plumpes Denken*," which Fredric Jameson has described as a gesture:

> towards an outside of thinking . . . which escapes representation by the individual thinker or the individual thought. The function of the impure, extrinsic reference is less to interpret, then, than to rebuke interpretation as such and to include within the thought the reminder that it is itself inevitably the result of a system that escapes it and which it perpetuates.[27]

This moment of externality in Adorno functions to prevent thought from "falling into the trap of identity and mistaking its limited form of reflection for the unattainable form of thought as such."[28] Similarly, this sudden shift into a vulgar-sociological reference at the end of *Erinnerungen* functions to prevent the film from falling into the trap of autobiographical self-identity and the comforts of imagistic representation. One could say it is at this moment that the film refuses the impertinence of saying "I" not only because the narrator is not so vain as to speak of herself as a subject, but also because some things just should not, and perhaps cannot, be spoken of in the first person.

Notes

[1] On the centrality of ethical issues in documentary, see, for example, "Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?" the first chapter in Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For a take specifically on ethical issues in autobiographical filmmaking, see Michelle Citron, "Fleeing from Documentary: The Ethics of Autobiographical Filmmaking," in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 271–86.

[2] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1974), 50.

[3] On the rise of such practices, see Jill Godmilow in conversation with Anne-Louise Shapiro, "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?" *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 80–101. The ubiquity of this practice is confirmed by

the number of documentary funding calls, in North America as well as in Europe, where "strong narratives" and "character driven stories" are increasingly expected.

[4] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 13.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 86.

[7] Robin Curtis points out that the tradition of autobiographical documentary in Germany is actually rather slight, in *Conscientious Viscerality: The Autobiographical Stance in German Film and Video* (Berlin: Edition Imorde, 2006), 143.

[8] Take, for example, Hito Steyerl's remarks during a panel discussion at the 2005 International Documentary Festival Amsterdam. In the context of a discussion of her film *November* (Germany, 2004), itself a first-person or autobiographical film, she specifically criticized the expectation that documentaries increasingly adhere to standards of narrative cinema. "A Debate: Dana Linssen interviews Hito Steyerl, Monika Borgmann, and Annik Leroy," International Documentary Festival, Amsterdam, November 28, 2005.

[9] Thomas Elsaesser usefully explores the contemporary significance of film festivals in "Film Festival Networks: The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 82–107. He provides a framework for understanding how film festivals provide a "post-national" milieu that exerts its influence on production, reception, distribution, and exhibition, though his comments on the formative influence of festivals on film style and form are cursory.

[10] Personal correspondence with Sylvia Schedelbauer, March 2010.

[11] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 88.

[12] Chi-hui Yang, program notes, The 2008 Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, quoted at: http://www.sylviaschedelbauer.com/memories.html (accessed September 30, 2009).

[13] See, for example, Michael Renov's "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film" for an exploration of this common narrative structure in the context of American autobiographical documentary, in *Framework* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65.

[14] There is an attribution in the closing credits, but it does not specify which portions of the voice-over are taken from the novel.

[15] All citations from Kundera's novel are from the film's English subtitles.

[16] The 1995 exhibition is documented in its accompanying catalog, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges, 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforchung, 2002).

[17] Renov also suggests that this is true of the autobiographical family film. Renov, "Family Secrets," 56.

[18] Ibid.

[19] This motif is not unique to Schedelbauer's film. It is present as well, for example, in Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Hermann mein Vater* (1987) or Herbert Schwarze's *Das bleibt, das kommt nie wieder* (1992).

[20] Curtis, *Conscientious Viscerality*,145–46. See also Malte Ludin's *Two or Three Things I Know about Him* (Germany, 2005), Jens Schanze's *Winterkinder: The Silent Generation* (Germany, 2005), or Marcus Carney's *The End of the Neubacher Project* (Austria, 2006).

[21] This was former Chancellor Helmut Kohl's speech at the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, on January 24, 1984, which opened with the lines, "I speak before you as one who could not be complicit in the crimes of the Nazi era, as due to the mercy of a late birth and the good fortune of my familial upbringing (Ich rede vor Ihnen als einer, der in der Nazizeit nicht in Schuld geraten konnte, weil er die Gnade der späten Geburt und das Glück eines besonderen Elternhauses gehabt hat)."

[22] Such a lack of affect has been widely observed and discussed among this man's generation. See, for example, the discussion of the "emotional numbing" and "apathy" in postwar Germany in Michael Geyer, "The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History," *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer 1997): 16–19.

[23] I base this claim on classroom discussions of this film.

[24] On pastiche, see Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August, 1984): 64–65.

[25] Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 203.

[26] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 85.

[27] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 30.

[28] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 85.