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‘However sick a joke…’: on comedy, the representation of suffering, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Melodrama and Volker Koepp’s Melancholy

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Primo Levi invokes the notion of a joke when he first arrives in Auschwitz. The prisoners, who have had nothing to drink for four days, are put into a room with a tap and a card that forbids drinking the water because it is dirty: ‘Nonsense. It seems obvious that the card is a joke, “they” know that we are dying of thirst and they put us in a room, and there is a tap, and *Wassertrinken Verboten*’.[1] In Levi’s example, the relationship of mocked and mocker is clear, as is the moral evaluation that condemns those that would ridicule and taunt the prisoners. Yet in Imre Kertész’s novel *Fateless*, the moral clarity offered by Levi is obscured is absent from Kertész’s reference to the notion of a joke. In it, the 14 year-old boy, György Köves, describes how the procedure he and his fellow passengers must undergo from arrival in Birkenau to either the gas chambers or showers elicits in him a ‘sense of certain jokes, a kind of student prank’.[2] Despite feeling increasingly queasy, for he is aware of the outcome of the procedure, György nevertheless has the impression of a stunt: gentlemen in imposing suits, smoking cigars who must have come up with a string of ideas, first of the gas, then of the bathhouse, next the soap, the flower beds, ‘and so on’ (*Fateless*, 111), jumping up and slapping palms when they conjured up a good one.

[1] Primo Levi, *If this is a Man and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1993), 28.

[2] Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (London: Vintage, 2006), 111.

In *Fateless* the moral heirarchy offered by Levi is undermined by a sustained distanced and laconic tone. Kertész elsewhere describes how *Fateless*, based on his own experience of being deported to Auschwitz and Saitz, was initially rejected by the publisher for this reason. Along with the shocking reference to the joke, the publisher objected to the protagonist's failure to transform the concentration camp experience into a shattering experience for the reader, who is offended and repelled by his 'lack of compassion' for other prisoners (*Fateless*, 57). Kertész acknowledges the challenge his novel presented to the authority of the Hungarian dictatorship, referring to its 'sheer impudence […], its style, its independence; a sarcasm inherent in its language that strains permitted bounds and dismisses the craven submissiveness that all dictatorships ordain for recognition and art'.[3] Yet the offense of coupling Auschwitz and a joke extends beyond the desire of a dictatorship for submissiveness. It also strains the expectation that Holocaust representation should remain uncoupled from the joke, and, more widely, from the comic. Through his eye for the joke and his comic sensibility, Kertesz interrogates representations of the 'greatest trauma of the twentieth century' (*Dossier K.*, 106) that seek to evoke horror through emotional identification, and he confounds our expectations of how traumatic experiences are depicted. The reader is herself unsettled by the possibility of a sick joke, one that she is drawn into enjoying, a voluptuous delight in reading divorced from the subject that perhaps hints, shockingly, that 'however sick a joke this may sound, Auschwitz proved a fruitful enterprise'.[4] Yet conversely, to deny 'aesthetic "pleasure"', to comply with the 'moral stink bomb' that censures Celan and Radnóti as barbaric, is also 'a sick joke' (*Dossier K.*, 105-6), for 'like it or not, art always regards life as a celebration' (*Dossier K.*, 104).

[3] Imre Kertész, *Dossier K.*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (New York: Melville House, 2013), 183.

[4] Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (London: Vintage, 2010), 41.

Kertész's work, with its comic edge, emphasizes how far spectatorship of extreme, traumatic events is fraught, raising the question of what exactly it is we take pleasure in when we watch suffering from afar, whether this pleasure is the one of knowing oneself to be the survivor, of *Schadenfreude*, or the satisfaction of morbid curiosity. The transfiguration of the violent and traumatic event into an aesthetic object relieves the spectator of the accusation of being a bystander and sanctions our pleasure in reading about or looking at another's suffering. The moral universe within which we may enjoy watching and reading of traumatic violence is normally carefully contained by the boundaries of genre or the aspiration, however articulated, to social and ethical education or transformation. But if our pleasure in other people's suffering becomes too manifest as precisely that, pleasure, the response is anxiety, moral disquiet and the devaluation of those modes of representation that clearly signal their association with pleasure, including comedy. It is precisely the unashamed association of comedy with pleasure that can cause anxiety when representations of trauma and suffering include a comic dimension in their aesthetic.

Disturbing Comedy

The post-Holocaust context has undeniably intensified doubts about comedy being an appropriate form of response to suffering and death. The suspicion of comedy sits within the wider distrust of pleasure that has a long philosophical tradition and that was particularly sharpened by modernism. In her analysis of pleasure and modernism, Laura Frost sets out the hierarchy explicit in the difference between *hedone* (pleasure), which was associated with the body and the senses, and *eudaimonia* (happiness), which was more highly valued as being

measured, metaphysical and partaking of truth.[5] The distinction that Plato makes between the 'true' pleasures of reason and intellect and the 'false' pleasures of the body is typical of the pleasure hierarchy that persists into the modern period.[6] In modernity, this hierarchy manifests itself particularly in what Andreas Huyssen terms the Great Divide between mass culture and high art.[7] This divide sustained a polarity whereby mass culture was distrusted and disparaged compared to high art, with, for example, the commodified, feminized and distracting pleasures of popular cinema being deemed inferior to the critical, reflective and contemplative modes of viewing offered by art. Popular culture became quickly aligned with the easy, superficial and fake pleasure of *kitsch*, a term that emerged with the ability to mass-produce cultural products. Seen as morally unsavoury, as an 'aesthetic form of lying', *kitsch* offers 'effortless enjoyment'.[8] In contrast, modernism emphasised the hard cognitive work needed for true pleasure, which is achieved through the process of deciphering complex writing. Quick and easy sensory pleasures are disavowed as modernism teaches readers to strive hard for their pleasure: 'Difficulty becomes an inherent value and is a deliberate aesthetic ambition set against too pleasing, harmonious reading effects.'[9]

It is against this background of philosophical and aesthetic distaste for pleasure that the conviction that there is 'something unseemly' and 'selfish' about it is radically intensified by debates around Holocaust representation.[10] The impact of Adorno's 'moral stinkbomb', as

[5] Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

[6] Plato, *Philebus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 102.

[7] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), viii.

[8] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 259.

[9] Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure*, 20.

[10] Ibid., 12.

Kertész puts it, that 'nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, barbarisch [ist]' ('To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'), reflects a profound crisis concerning representation.[11] This crisis relates fundamentally to the problem of ethical representation, including the incongruity between the aesthetic pleasures of art and the extreme violence and suffering of the genocide. As Adorno went on to say, his assertion about poetry 'gilt nicht blank, gewiß aber, daß [nach Auschwitz], weil es möglich war und bis ins Unabsehbare möglich bleibt, keine heitere Kunst mehr vorgestellt werden kann.' (The statement that it is not possible to write art after Auschwitz does not hold absolutely, but it is certain that after Auschwitz, because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, light-hearted art is no longer conceivable.')[12] The seriousness of art thus becomes further aligned with the seriousness of its ethical response to the events it depicts and the validity of its truth claim. As Dominick LaCapra points out, this has resulted in a tendency to privilege aesthetic modes that emphasize rupture, aporia and loss in the representation of limit events.[13]

Melancholy has assumed particular significance as the emotional and subjective state that seems to bear witness to the immeasurable loss and suffering of the Holocaust and of traumatic suffering. At the individual level the subject, by internalizing the lost object, ensures that its 'Existenz [...] psychisch fortgesetzt [wird]' ('the existence of the lost object is

[11] Theodor Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Prismen. Ohne Leitbild*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), X.1, 30; Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1983), 34.

[12] Theodor Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), XI, 603; Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature II*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 251.

[13] Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits. Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 65.

psychically prolonged').[14] Hence loss is not simply forgotten with time and the pain of suffering remains actual. Figuratively, melancholy can be understood as supporting the ethical injunction to remember and as ensuring that the lost other remains constitutive of how the past is approached and represented. Melancholy's affective intensity also serves as testament to the desolation of the human condition, serving, in its relationship to trauma, as a metonymy for being. Crucial to the privileging of melancholy as a representational mode that is adequate to human suffering is its association with the masculine genius and the melancholy man's ability 'die Wahrheit […] schärfer zu erfassen als andere' ('he has a keener eye for the truth').[15] Thus historically 'melancholia appears as a specific representational form for male creativity' as the artist uses his 'superior aesthetic virtues' to transform suffering into 'a privileged artifact'.[16] As an 'exceptional individual', the melancholy man is a suitable heir to tragedy, for he embodies the suspicion that 'truth itself [might] be gloomy'.[17]

The 'true' and gloomy masculine pleasure of melancholy is in marked contrast to the 'false' feminine pleasures offered by melodrama. Despite being a mode of representation that places suffering and victimhood at its core, melodrama has traditionally been treated with suspicion as a debased form of tragedy. Its historical genesis in pantomime and music hall

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[14] Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie' in *Sigmund Freud. Studienausgabe. Band III: Psychologie des Unbewußten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1989), 199; Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works,* trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1917), 237–258, 245.

[15] Freud, 'Trauer', 200; Freud, 'Mourning', 246.

[16] Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 8.

[17] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 76.

brings with it the taint of common entertainment, as does its tendency towards sensationalism. Its traditional emphasis on action and spectacle promote an 'aesthetics of astonishment' that 'proposes the total enjoyment of excruciating situations in their unadulterated […] state.'[18] Melodrama's fascination with overwrought feelings and pathos seem to confirm its superficiality, fuelling the view that its pleasures are based on no more than 'emotional thrill which has no social significance' or ethical worth.[19] Its promise of wish fulfilment makes it vulnerable to accusations that it trivializes suffering and relapses into *kitsch*.

Comedy too can easily smack of the accessible but trivial amusements of mass culture. As the 'Erbfeind des Erhabenen' ('hereditary enemy of the *sublime*') it undermines the aspiration of high art as well as offends against topics considered serious or sublime: 'Wenn Komik ihre Funktion besonders gut erfüllt, meldet sich gleich das Mißtrauen des gebildeten Ästheten, der die hehre Kultur gefährdet sieht.' ('When comedy fulfils its function particularly well, it immediately elicits the mistrust of the educated aesthete, who sees it as a threat to sublime art')[20] The effortless fun of much comedy makes it seem incompatible with the horror of atrocity and suffering, a view that is reinforced by comedy's unabashed relationship to joy or delight as ends in themselves. Comedy's association with the pleasures of the senses and of the debased body mark it as superficial and offensive, for comedy

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[18] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 36. See also Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity. Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 37–58.

[19] Simon Shepherd, 'Pauses of Mutual Agitation', in *Melodrama. Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: bfi, 1994), 25–37, 25.

[20] Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, in *Jean Paul: Werke*, ed. N. Miller (Munich: Hanser, 1980), V, 105; Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's School for aesthetics*, trans. Margaret R. Hale (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 73; Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Johann Sonleitner, Klaus Zeyringer, eds, *Komik in der österreichischen Literatur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1996), 10.

provokes the suspicion that someone is the object of amusement and that victims are being objectified for the laughter or smiles of others, even if it is through the medium of fiction. Instead of encouraging the empathy for another's suffering that is central to an ethical encounter, comedy can facilitate our pleasure in the other's reduced state. Furthermore, comedy's characteristics of distance and play present a fundamental challenge to the orthodoxy of both Holocaust representation and the representation of trauma more generally. Distance from suffering can represent a betrayal of that suffering, a rejection of those who were murdered, or a rejection of those elements of one's identity that are inseparable from the experience of persecution and trauma. As Jean Améry so forcefully articulates, even though the passing of time inevitably leads to the healing of wounds, such healing has something '*wider*moralisch' ('*anti*moral') about it, a sentiment that can make any form of distancing highly ambivalent.[21]

The ability of comedy to generate and hold together incompatible perspectives, as well as its playful tenor, offends against the unspeakability of the Holocaust, and the tendency to ascribe to it a sacred or unique status. This is Rüdiger Steinlein's reservation: he worries that by detracting from the sacred Holocaust comedy may undermine the scale of the Nazi crimes and the fundamental way in which they transgressed against humanity.[22] Nevertheless, although anxiety about comedy relating to the Holocaust persists, it is receding, depending very much on what the object of the comedy is and who the author is. In 1982 Peter Stenberg suggested that the passing of time had led to enough distance and opened up a space for black comedy. But his concern is nevertheless manifested in a new type of prescription: not only

[21] Jean Améry, 'Ressentiments', in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2012), 129; Jean Améry, 'Resentments', in *At the Mind's Limits*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), 72.

[22] Rüdiger Steinlein, 'Das Furchtbarste lächerlich? Komik und Lachen in Texten der deutschen Holocaust-Literatur', in *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz*, ed. Manuel Köppen (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1993), 97–106.

does he specify the particular nature of the comedy, he also argues that the taboo on comedy may only be broken by a member 'of the victimised culture, who has gained a certain distance from the time and place of the Holocaust without being able to forget it.'[23] Anne Fuchs rightly points to the problematic nature of Stenberg's position, commenting that being a survivor does not in itself 'justify employing the wrong register in portraying the Holocaust'. Fuchs makes two further interesting points. First, she argues that by focussing on the Jewishness of the writer, Stenberg ignores what effect the comedy may have on a German readership. Secondly, she points out that the sense of guilt that is typical of the German post-war cultural climate, and that was reinforced by the 'negative but sacred boundary around Auschwitz', has contributed to 'collective repression'.[24] Her points reflect precisely the vacillation that characterizes the moral response to comedy generally: on the one hand fears about its tendentious impact, in this case the worry that it would reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes and the attempt to normalize the Holocaust; on the other hand comedy's liberating challenge of norms, which here include stipulating the rules of Holocaust and trauma representation as well as condoning a culture of un-self critical guilt.

It would be misleading to insist on a strict polarity between these two responses to comedy, for the sacralization of the Holocaust need not itself be devoid of tendentiousness. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, the 'depoliticization of the holocaust, its elevation into the properly sublime Evil […], can also be a political act of utter cynical manipulation, a political

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[23] Peter Stenberg, 'Memories of the Holocaust: Edgar Hilsenrath and the Fiction of the Genocide', in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte,* 56 (1982): 277–289, 278.

[24] Anne Fuchs, 'Edgar Hilsenrath's Poetics of Insignificance and the Tradition of Humour in German-Jewish Ghetto Writing', in *Ghetto Writing. Traditional and Eastern Jewry in German-Jewish Literature from Heine to Hilsenrath*, ed. Anne Fuchs and Florian Krobb (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1999), 180–194, 182–83.

intervention aiming at legitimizing a certain kind of hierarchical political relation.'[25] Ofer Ashkenazi makes a similar point in relation to the specific German context in his discussion of contemporary comic representations of the Nazi past. Concentrating on visual representations, he distinguishes between pre-unification comedy that tends to depict Nazis returning into the post-war reality and post-unification images that 'emphasize the inconceivability of the inclusion of Nazi worldviews, pathos, and appearance within "normal" society'.[26] The humorous gap between the past and the present could be read as a form of escapism from responsibility, but, he insists, the humour is also a response to issues of representation: 'humor enables one to represent Nazism *beyond* the trauma and its mechanism of suppression. The humoristic references […] are a reaction to, and a result of, the perceived obstructions of representation – not an escapist indifference to it.'[27]

Jill Twark situates the comic responses to the Nazi past within the general growth in humour culture in post-unification Germany, which is a result of greater openness among Germans, particularly younger Germans towards their history: 'Germans now possess enough self-confidence to be able to laugh at just about anything, including themselves and their

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[25] Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2011), 67.

[26] Ofer Ashkenazi, 'Ridiculous Trauma: Comic Representations of the Nazi Past in Contemporary German Visual Culture', *Cultural Critique*, 78 (2011): 88–118, 98.

[27] Ibid., 101. Ashkenazi is referring here to: Dani Levy's 2007 film *Mein Führer: Die Wirklich Wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* as well as Levy's response to *Der Untergang* as a film which made him laugh because of the absurdity of 'this amiable, old grandpa and his funny ideas in the bunker' (quoted on p. 96); the July 2002 cover of the satirical magazine *Titanic* which depicted an image of Hitler with the 'schrecklicher Verdacht' that he might be anti-Semitic; a film clip made by Florian Wittmann in 2008 which super-imposes a voiceover by the comedian Gerhard Polt onto a clip of Hitler taken from Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* and shows Hitler getting very worked up about his encounter with a car leasing company (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSrTiIhMDn4. [accessed 30 August 2014].

turbulent history.'[28] Yet her assertion is perhaps rather too slick. Although it is true that the question of whether Germans, and others, should or should not mock Hitler and the Nazis is no longer relevant because they do, comic depictions still cause controversy. Discussion around Mel Brooks's musical *The Producers*, Walter Moers's comic strip *Adolf, die Nazi-Sau* (1998-2006) and Dani Levy's film *Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* (2007) are testament to ongoing anxiety. Thus the heated responses to comic depictions 'demonstrates that the conundrum of German ridicule and laughter about the Nazi past […] is far from being resolved' and fuels concern that such depictions are no more than '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* "lite"' and a profitable commodity.[29]

It is significant that these examples focus on ridiculing or satirizing the Nazi perpetrators and their ideology and are therefore perhaps less likely to raise the complex ethical issues that comedy directed specifically at Holocaust victims does. Nor, from a different angle, do they raise the troubling ethical questions relating to texts in which the legacy of the Holocaust and Second World War is linked with German suffering. German narratives of suffering have been implicated in a 'rhetorics of victimisation'[30] that has played a significant role in responses to the Second World War. The mass migration of up to fifteen million ethnic Germans at the end of the war,[31] the mass rape of women and the bombing of German towns were fundamental in the construction of West Germany as 'a nation of victims,

[28] Jill E. Twark, 'Introduction: Recent Trends in Post-Unification German Humor', in *Strategies of Humor in Post-Unification German Literature, Film and Other Media*, ed. Jill E. Twark (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 1–25, 4.

[29] Annika Orich and Florentine Strzelczyk, '"Steppende Nazis mit Bildungsauftrag": Marketing Hitler Humor in Post-Unification Germany', in Twark, *Strategies of Humor*, 292–329 and 294–95.

[30] Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press, 2001), 48.

[31] Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion. West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 1.

an imagined community defined by the experience of loss and displacement during the Second World War'.[32] Discourses of victimhood were present in the domestic sphere from 1945 onwards,[33] but also played a vital role in forging an identity for the united Germany. If in the FRG narratives of suffering had offered collective legitimacy against East European communism and eased integration into the West,[34] in the united Germany they offered a means for establishing cohesion. Thus, for example, forced expulsion was viewed by the government as common to the history of East and West Germans and therefore as useful for a post-unification understanding of the past.[35]

To acknowledge German suffering does not necessarily mean avoiding issues of responsibility and guilt. As Rainer Schulze remarks, 'the moral obligation to remember the victims of National Socialism does not mean that it is not possible to remember the victims of the consequences of National Socialism'.[36] Yet his formulation is crucial, for German suffering is often part of what Samuel Salzborn refers to as the 'Entkontextualisierung der Vergangenheit' ('decontextualization of the past') and it all too quickly becomes equated with victimhood.[37] German suffering and victimhood has been instrumental in diminishing or deflecting from questions of culpability for policies that led to war and genocide, a process

[32] Moeller, *War Stories*, 6.

[33] Helmut Schmitz and Annette Seidel-Arpacı, eds, *Narratives of Trauma. Discourses of German Wartime Suffering in National and International Perspective* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 4–6.

[34] Ahonen, *After the Expulsion*, 271.

[35] Rainer Schulze, 'Forced Migration of German Populations During and After the Second World War: History and Memory', in *The Disentanglement of Populations. Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Post-War Europe, 1944-9*, ed. Jessica Reinisch and Elizabeth White (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 51–70, 61.

[36] Ibid., 64.

[37] Samuel Salzborn, 'Kollektive Unschuld. Anmerkungen zu Funktion und Intention der neuen Debatte um Flucht und Vertreibung'. See *Sozialistische Positionen. Beiträge zu Politik, Kultur und Gesellschaft*. http://www.sopos.org/aufsaetze/3d18db8cdf4b8/1.phtml. [accessed 12 July 2014].

that has occurred in three main ways. First, through uncritical or uncontextualized comparison which helps promote the 'indivisibility of *humanitas*'.[38] Secondly, through the 'Subjektivierung des Geschichtsdiskurses' ('subjectivization of historical discourse'), which manifests itself as '*human interest* ebenso wie als selbstkritische Reflexion, als historiographische Rekonstruktion ebenso wie als persönliche "Aneignung" und Übernahme "nationaler Verantwortung"' ('*human interest* as well as self-critical reflection, personal "appropriation" and taking on "national responsibility").[39] The academic interest in ego documents and memory studies has contributed to the shift from recounting experiences of suffering in private, which has always been a vital aspect of how the war is remembered, to narratives of personal experience moving into public discourse. And complementing the role of the academy's interest in subjective accounts has been the huge impact of cultural representations of the German experience of the expulsions and bombings since 1989.[40] Finally, the globalization of Holocaust memory and the universalization of trauma have lent

[38] Bill Niven, 'Implicit Equations in Constructions of German Suffering', in *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 105–124, 113.

[39] Daniel Fulda, 'Abschied von der Zentralperspektive. Der nicht nur literarische Geschichtsdiskurs im Nachwende-Deutschland als Dispositiv für Jörg Friedrichs *Brand*', in *Bombs Away! Representing the Air War over Europe and Japan*, ed. Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 45–64, 58.

[40] Key texts that fuelled debate include Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), Günter Grass's *Im Krebsgang* (2002), Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* (2002), Uwe Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) and Guido Knopp's *Die große Flucht* (2001). There is an extensive bibliography on the discourse of German suffering and victimhood, including accounts of the *Historikerstreit*, the Walser-Bubis debate on 'normalisation', the impact of cultural representations on that debate, and the importance of memory culture. In addition to the works cited here, see the Bibliography in the special edition on German suffering, *German Life and Letters,* 57, 4 (2004): 354–56; also, the select bibliography in *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Bill Niven, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 276–282.

credibility to German discourses of victimhood. As Fassin and Rechtman remark: 'By applying the same psychological classification to the person who suffers violence, the person who commits it, and the person who witnesses it, the concept of trauma profoundly transforms the moral framework of what constitutes humanity'.[41] Extreme or traumatic suffering has become a signifier of humanity regardless of the moral context in which it happened.

In what follows I consider the work of two German directors whose works differently represent disturbing pasts. The films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Koepp are centrally concerned with the legacy of suffering caused by the Second World War and the Holocaust but they display a discernible comic aesthetic. Crucially, the texts are not comedies, but they assimilate a comic aesthetic with other representational strategies and thereby embody Benjamin's conjoining of comedy with mourning: 'Die Komik – richtiger: der reine Spaß – ist die obligate Innenseite der Trauer, die ab und zu wie das Futter eines Kleides im Saum oder Revers zur Geltung kommt' (Comedy – or more precisely: the pure joke – is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt.').[42] The inclusion of comedy crystallizes the question of how we may enjoy portrayals of suffering, for by integrating comedy into texts that are predominantly concerned with the legacy of suffering, anxiety arising over the pleasure at others' pain is not contained by conventions of genre or form. The incorporation of a comic aesthetic can function to disturb the values that commonly attend particular artistic forms and representational modes, not least melodrama and melancholy. Furthermore,

[41] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma. An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 21.

[42] Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991) vol. 1.1, 304; Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), 125–6.

consideration of the ways in which comic devices are deployed helps illuminate how empathy and identification are constructed to sustain particular identities and moral positions, thereby unsettling those positions: Fassbinder tempers melodrama with comedy in the context of West Germany of the economic miracle, and Koepp gives his melancholic vision a comic edge in his documentary explorations of the post-1989 *Ostgebiete*.

Melodrama and Comedy: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

In melodrama the experience of suffering assumes a moral agency, for in the polarised scheme of good versus evil, suffering is the result of virtue overpowered by the very real presence of evil in the world. As Peter Brooks argues, melodrama is a response to the loss of the sacred and the moral certainties it guaranteed. A tragic vision of humanity is no longer available in modernity, for such a vision is dependent upon sacred truths. Melodrama reintroduces the notion of ethical striving, but in modernity this is only possible 'in personal terms',[43] and in consequence ethics is associated with emotional states. Tragedy, of course, is also concerned with suffering, but melodrama expresses suffering without restraint and, furthermore, commonly shows passivity in the face of suffering rather than assertion or decisive action. Melodrama is characterized by an intensity of emotion, particularly of love and suffering, that offends social norms. But it is as the victim of social norms that the suffering victim acquires moral value: her agonized body is symptom of the ideological fissures that run between ideals of fulfilment (personal and social) and actual antagonism. Perhaps surprising given melodrama's focus on suffering is its importance in contributing and drawing attention to narrative pleasure. Melodrama, in its emotional excess and its strategies of eliciting emotional identification with its protagonists, is peculiarly honest about the

[43] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 16.

troubling relationship between representations of suffering and enjoyment: finitude is terrible and we'll jolly well suffer and have a good cry. This pleasure is neither ennobling nor redemptive and therefore draws attention to the fact that storytelling is also about pleasure, whatever the content of that fiction. Furthermore, melodrama's emphasis on emotional excess brings it close to what are also qualities of comedy: hyperbole, amplification of recognisable situations and types, unbelievable plot twists, shock, overwrought emotions and tension. The slippage from melodrama into comedy, from responding with pathos to responding with amusement, is often seen as a failure of melodrama, but the marked co-existence of melodrama with comedy puts into question both the ethical valorisation of suffering and of identification with it.

Melodrama emerges as Fassbinder's key representational mode. Thus the intensely personal space of Fassbinder's films is also social and economic and relationships are a symptom of wider systems of social and economic exploitation, typically of bourgeois capitalism. Furthermore, these are German spaces, and the systems of emotional, political and economic exchange and exploitation are situated in relation to Nazism and its legacy, even if, as in *Effi Briest*, it is set in a time before. Fassbinder's films are concerned with the destructive effects of bourgeois capitalism and values, and the failure of its ideals that both fed and refused to learn from Nazism. His work traces the 'sellout of bourgeois morality, the free market of humanistic values, and the meritocracy turned black market of the emotions.'[44] This destructive effect is figured in terms of victimhood and suffering, for relationships cannot flourish in a system in which value is governed by commodification and competition. Fassbinder's interest in the suffering German body functions as a vehicle of criticism of unjust power relations. But it is also problematic: it raises questions about the purpose of

[44] Thomas Elsaesser, 'R. W. Fassbinder. Prodigal Son, Not Reconciled?' in *A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, ed. Brigitte Peucker (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 45–52, 50.

identifying with and inhabiting a victim position in a context where Germans perpetrated atrocities upon others. This particular German context is, though, inseparable from the issues arising from a wider general trend that increasingly ascribes ethical value to victims, a trend that underpins melodrama as a mode of representation that enjoys and valorises suffering.[45]

Fassbinder's style is noteworthy for its combination of melodrama with extensive comic devices, which range from irony through visual humour, situation comedy, incongruity, satire, *Schadenfreude,* and, last but not least, sheer ludicrousness.[46] All facilitate a playful response on the part of the spectator and play a crucial role in imposing a limit to the melodrama and masochistic suffering portrayed in so much of his work. The limit set by comedy is particularly evident in relation to Fassbinder's appearance in his own films. The director figures as a character in many of his films, among others as the Greek in *Katzelmacher*, a gangster in *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod* (*Love is Colder than Death*) and as Fox in *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (*Fox and his Friends*). Fassbinder's tendency not to change his appearance or acting style from one role to another (Fox being an obvious exception) at once makes him a player in his own fantasy world, but also includes him within the critical, and often comic framework. This is very evident in *Niklashauser Fart* (*The Niklashausen Journey*), a film that explores the contribution of a vanguard to bringing about revolution through performance and role-play. Fassbinder is of course one of the vanguard, directing his comrades, slouching around and perpetually smoking: acting himself. The comic effect of Fassbinder's repeated appearances, as of those of his leather jacket, has received no comment. Rather, his involvement in his own films has been criticized as egotistical indulgence, the

[45] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma,* 58–97.

[46] For a detailed discussion of the comic aesthetic in Fassbinder's films see Stephanie Bird, 'The Funny Side of Fassbinder: From Melodramatic Vicious Circles to Comic Double Vision', in *The Modern Language Review,* 105, no. 4 (2010): 1087–1104.

unmediated playing out of his own problems or fantasies, or as a positive mode of identifying with his protagonists. Thus Kaja Silverman analyses Fassbinder's involvement in *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden* (*In a Year of 13 Moons*) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in relation to male masochism and the exploration of non-phallic masculinity. Yet the comedy forms part of another crucial effect of his presence within his films: the self-contained fantasy of the film is ruptured by his entry into it. This importance of this rupture for understanding how we regard and identify with the suffering of others is explicitly addressed in the epilogue of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.[47]

In the slaughterhouse scene a pile of bodies is being processed as though they are animals in an abattoir. The iconography of the piled up bodies is powerfully reminiscent of the corpses in the death camps, establishing a direct and problematic link between the German protagonist, Hans Biberkopf's, suffering and that of the murdered Jews. Watching the scene are two angels, and next to them is the silent figure of Fassbinder. Kaja Silverman argues that by standing next to the angels and being an onlooker, Fassbinder invites the viewer to realise that he, Fassbinder, is himself part of Biberkopf's suffering body. Silverman privileges this moment as one of heteropathic identification, in which the 'I' is 'so overwhelmed and […] fettered' by the other self that its 'formal status as a subject is usurped by the other person's personality'.[48] Yet the scene is more complex than Silverman's reading suggests, for she does not take account of the fact that the figure of the watching Fassbinder is part of wider dynamic that includes a comic dimension. The scene is characterised by a degree of exaggeration that tips into hyperbole: the intrusive operatic aria expresses heightened emotional states not normally associated with a slaughterhouse; the moaning bodies are glimmering with glitter and nipple-tassels; and the acting of the butchers is stylised to the

[47] Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Second Sight, 2007) [on DVD].

[48] Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), 264.

point of being stilted. The excesses of the scene, which tip easily into caricature, the grotesque, and even hilarity, extend to the three observers. The two angels are dressed in suspenders, with golden tunics and golden, glittering hair, with a few black costume feathers at their shoulders. Their camp appearance visually ironizes their serious task of deciding Biberkopf's fate, and they offer an amused commentary on the scene: 'schwing, hack, hack; schwing, schwing, hack' ('swing, hack hack; swing, swing, hack'), says Sarug, to which Terah happily responds 'schwing, hack' ('swing, hack') (XIV, 57:00). Next to them, the gloomy presence of Fassbinder also has a comic dimension. Like a caricature of all his previous roles, he slouches to the left of the screen, the ubiquitous cigarette raised to his lips, looking like a gangster in his shades and hat.

The comic aspect of this scene means that the spectator's identification with the suffering Biberkopf or with the anonymous bodies as emblematic of suffering humanity is interrupted. By placing Fassbinder next to the angels, two contrasting perspectives on the scene are concurrently held in the same frame, one of identification, the other of (amused) observation. Neither excludes the other, nor is either reducible to the other. Furthermore, the appearance of Fassbinder within the diegesis, although possibly demonstrating the importance of heteropathic identification as a mode of response to suffering, is not the equivalent of privileging that response. The entry of Fassbinder into the fictional space explicitly draws the spectator's attention to the ambiguity of the relationship between Fassbinder the director, the character of Fassbinder the director, and shifting perspectives of the camera. This explicit ambiguity ruptures the absorbed gaze, here associated with identification with the suffering victim, and offers an ironic perspective on the iconographic alignment of Biberkopf's suffering with that of murdered Jews, as well as modes of identificatory spectatorship that draw the viewer into elevating the status of their own suffering through such visual equivalence. The slaughterhouse scene constructs a complex model of spectatorships and

demonstrates in microcosm the effect of the co-existence of a comic aesthetic with melodrama.

Importantly, Fassbinder's presence in his films is evident not just from his appearances but also from his distinct style. As a vital component of his style, comedy both contributes to and is itself fuelled by other alienation effects. These include the alienation caused by the sheer ludicrousness running through the director's work, a sense of the ridiculous that frequently stems from poor acting or from shoddy mise-en-scène, with the unintended comedy that results (his Western *Whity* being one of the more obvious examples). As Paul Coates points out, scholarship seems 'often oblivious of the flaws caused by an indifference to acting quality, marshalling camp and Brechtianism as alibis, and of the effects of Fassbinder's preferred one-take aesthetic […]: flaws swept under the carpet of the works' political utility, or an auteur status ensured by stylistic and thematic continuities stewing monotonously'.[49] The blatant flaws of Fassbinder's aesthetic go beyond what John David Rhodes characterizes as the 'obviousness of its belabored appearance', and should not be divorced from a style that is marked by his presence.[50] Thus more generally, Fassbinder's comedy, flawed style and all, interrupts the process of identification with victimhood, or with masochistic abjection, that his films at one level undoubtedly invite. Indeed the manner in which the director flaunts his presence, actually and through his distinct style, goes some way to affirm Gilles Deleuze's view of male masochism: 'What insolence and humour, what irrepressible defiance and ultimate triumph lie hidden behind an ego that claims to be so

[49] Paul Coates, 'Swearing and Forswearing Fidelity in Fassbinder's Berlin Alexanderplatz', in Peucker, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, 398–419, 410.

[50] John David Rhodes, 'Fassbinder's Work. Style, Sirk, and Queer Labor', in Peucker, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, 181–203, 197.

weak'.[51] If an ethical impetus is to be sought anywhere in Fassbinder's work it is as a result of the ambivalent and unsettling confrontation of, on the one hand, the invitation to identify with those entrapped in structures of melodramatic suffering and on the other the excessive, often comic and ludicrous, style. Comedy limits the stewing monotony of melodramatic suffering and the unmediated identification that it elicits. Conversely, melodrama's concern for the victim, its insistence that good and evil persist in the post-sacral world, ensures that empathy with the victim is not sacrificed to comic distance, even if it is disturbed or 'unsettled'.[52]

Melancholy and Comedy: Volker Koepp

In stark contrast to the hysterical excesses of melodrama, melancholy has been privileged through its associations with the exceptional individual. Freud describes melancholy as the internalization of the lost object in order to preserve it, resulting in symptoms that may be pathological since the lost object is unconscious and remains obscure. In mourning, in contrast, the lost object is identifiable and the loss can be worked through. As discussed above, Freud perpetuates the link of melancholy with male genius: unlike melodrama, the melancholic's access to the truth of the tragedy of the human condition is a man's prerogative, and it is as someone who carries the weight of suffering that he derives moral profundity. As Mary Cosgrove argues, the melancholic's deep sense of loss and the nature of that loss is what has been seen as fertile ground for creativity and imagination in post-War discourse.[53] Writing about melancholy and writing about the Holocaust are structurally affiliated, for in

[51] Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 124.

[52] LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 65.

[53] Mary Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz. Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), 22.

both, 'the effort to find words that capture the object without distorting it raises the issues of knowing and representation and determines that these are the central concerns of the signifying process.'[54] Yet this structural similarity notwithstanding, the moral implications of representing suffering through a melancholy lens remain complex and controversial. The pathological dimension of melancholy has also led to a highly critical evaluation of it as an emotional mode through which to respond to and represent limit events, since it inhibits the healthy work of mourning. Paul Ricoeur argues for this view in his alignment of mourning with working through and melancholy with acting out, as does Dominick LaCapra, who sees in melancholy 'a compulsive preoccupation with aporia' which functions as a 'secularized displacement[] of the sacred'.[55] Melancholy facilitates the elision of a generalized, timeless absence with a historically and socially specific loss, which in turn leads to easier (self-)identification as victim by those who are not victims.

The documentary filmmaker Volker Koepp was born in Stettin, now Szczecin, in 1944, and fled westward with his mother, settling and growing up in East Berlin. His work is saturated with a melancholy that derives from his strong interest in the *Ostgebiete* and the longer span of history within which events and movements of peoples have taken place. The Eastern Territories, those areas that before 1945 were part of Greater Germany, including West and East Prussia and Pomerania, are areas that experienced the extreme violence of war, persecution and genocide. Koepp explicitly presents these areas both as having a long history of conflicts and his films constantly allude to the deep legacy of suffering left by the violence

[54] Ibid., 7.

[55] Ricoeur, *Memory*, 68–80; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23. See also LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 63. Here he confirms the view that melancholy is like 'the affect or "feel" of aporia and absolute paradox', but while he argues that it may 'block any significant […] working through traumatic symptoms, however hesitant, limited, or self-critical', he also sees the positive benefits of melancholy in that it 'prevents closure or turning the page of the past'.

of the war and the cold war. Furthermore, he is fascinated by Eastern Europe as a place where different ethnic groups lived alongside over centuries and he consistently encourages individuals of different ethnicity, class and age to tell their own stories. Their experiences form part of the wider collapse of multicultural communities, of the thriving Czernowitz where Romanians, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews lived side by side, or of East Prussia where Germans, Poles and Kashubians did. The melancholy or nostalgic yearning for this lost time is, though, offset by an intense humanity and interest in individuals. Many of the characters recount experiences of violent dispossession, genocide, death of immediate family and abandonment, but they are mostly not bitter or accusatory. Indeed, Koepp's fascination with his subjects extends to his eye for laughter and comedy. He admits to being amazed by how amusingly people relate all manner of things that are not amusing and sees it as ideal for art of any sort if it can maintain its balance between tragedy and comedy.[56]

Central to the films' comic moments are the characters themselves, their idiosyncrasies, their own sense of humour and their interaction with others. Individual idiosyncrasy is manifested in peoples' faces: the long comic tradition that centres on physiognomies and appearance cannot be ignored when watching Koepp. Comic effect is heightened by the director's use of an unflinching camera, which elicits varied responses ranging from ignoring it, through playing up to it, to embarrassment. Koepp himself plays with these reactions, building the differences and contrasts into the structure of the films. These characteristic features of Koepp's comedy come together most clearly in his sustained use of the comedy double act. In *Herr Zwilling und Frau Zuckermann* (1999) the comedy generated by the two friends arises from the strong contrasts between them.[57] Frau

[56] Volker Koepp, in interview with Rainer Rother, 5th May 2006, *Schattenland*, 20:40 [on DVD]

[57] Volker Koepp, *Herr Zwilling und Frau Zuckermann*, in the 'Volker Koepp Kollektion' (Berlin: Edition Salzgeber, 2010) [on DVD].

Zuckermann is small and plump, whereas Herr Zwilling is taller and thinner and cuts a somewhat dour figure. She is spirited, dynamic, decisive in her movements, humorous and positive. He is lugubrious, doleful, long-faced and possesses a gloomy outlook. She, the optimist, speaks confidently into the camera; he, the pessimist, behaves as though there is no camera there, waiting for instructions to begin talking even though he is already being filmed.

Uckermark (2002, henceforth *U*) opens with a five-minute double act in which Adolf-Heinrich von Arnim speaks almost non-stop, and with great passion, about the virtues of a proper rail network. He speaks at length about his successful fight to increase the number of trains along the branch line (up from one to eight or nine in each direction), the connections as they existed in 1923, the importance of establishing effective bus connections, (which are not yet what he would wish them to be), the need for investment in the railway infrastructure (after one hundred years of simply taking), and the crucial role of the transport network. Frau Albert, in the meantime, the reticent young woman who operates the old Wilhelmine signaling equipment from 1907, is always in the frame, standing with a deadpan expression except when he addresses his remarks to her or solicits a response. They are an incongruous pair: the urbane aristocrat and the provincial worker, the articulate man and the woman of few words, the old activist and the passive employee. Indeed, in his enthusiastic bearing, von Arnim seems more youthful than she: despite being 84, he says, he still has a lot before him, adding that he is freshly married (*U*, 2:43).

Also in *Uckermark* the two old farmers are similar in background and outlook.[58] Visual comedy is initially established through filming the men head on, with a still and unflinching camera. The old men sit next to each other: one is plump, and his physique is unflatteringly emphasized by the direct frontal shot on his groin; the other is scrawny. Both wear similar hats, and together they are a gloomy, Laurel and Hardy-esque pair. There is

[58] Volker Koepp, *Uckermark*, in the 'Volker Koepp Kollektion' (Berlin: Edition Salzgeber, 2010) [on DVD].

nothing funny about what they say, for they circle around their memories of disempowerment, their repeated experience of having stock and land taken from them, first after the war, then through collectivization, finally after reunification. Yet the way in which they egg each other on to speak lends a comic edge to the scene, for they enact many of the routines of a double act. One repeats and reinforces what the other says: '"viele sind nach Canada", "ja viele von hier nach Canada"' ('"many have left for Canada", "yes, many have gone from here to Canada"') (*U*, 53:40), and they constantly affirm, with repeated 'ja' or 'ja, ja', what the other has said. They bicker mildly like an old married couple, disagreeing about whether to relate certain events: '"Ich möchte was sagen, aber ich werd' mal lieber still sein" […] "Es ist die Wahrheit". "Ach, und wenn's die Wahrheit ist" ('"I want to say something, but it's best if I stay silent [...] It's the truth". "Well, so what if it's the truth"' (*U*, 1:19:00). When they are finally persuaded to speak, they then bicker about what point in the past things started to go wrong.

Comedy functions at one level to temper Koepp's melancholy sensibility, for he is drawn to people who fit his wider humanitarian striving for coherent and harmonious multi-ethnic community in which difference does not lead to conflict and suffering does not result in antagonism and a perpetuation of strife. However, at the same time Koepp's taste for laughter and comedy complements rather than challenges his melancholic sense of loss, for he uses it to advocate the restoration of what has been lost. Rather than forming part of a self-reflexive or critical tension, comedy is inseparable from his emphasis on landscape, which offers coherence, continuity and belonging. Beautiful landscapes are central to Koepp's films. Individuals are firmly located in their surroundings; they speak to the camera against a background of their home or their workplace. Interior shots are set within a wider, rural context: the countryside is either just outside, or the city, as with Czernowitz, is shown only after shots of the surrounding land. Thus human habitation is visually posited as arising out of

the land and the aesthetic focus on the timeless, unchanging countryside is frequently reinforced by voice-overs that summarize the momentous events of migration, invasion and wars, all of which have been survived by the enduring landscape. The landscape becomes 'Medium des Gedächtnisses' ('a medium of memory') rather than simply a place to live.[59] Individuals themselves are victims of larger forces beyond their sphere of personal responsibility and trauma and suffering are part of humanity's lot in the *longue durée* of nature, and are thereby removed from the realm of political scrutiny. Claims to the land may change, but nature persists: as the director of the ornithology station in *Memelland* asserts, whoever was in power, be they Communists, Bolsheviks, Catholics or Protestants, his nightingales carry on singing for all (1:25:05).[60]

Landscape functions as a counterpoint to the cruelty of history, but Koepp's delight in the *comédie humaine* is resolutely unpolitical. As Stefan Reinecke writes, Koepp's 'poetische[r] suchende[r] Blick taugt nicht, um etwas zu kritisieren.' ('searching poetic gaze is no good for criticizing anything.')[61] Koepp avoids satire and social criticism by constructing 'filmische Liebeserklärungen' ('filmic declarations of love') in which people are filmed in context while carrying out their normal activities.[62] His devotion is identifiable in moments of portraiture, influenced by photography and art, when the camera lingers on peoples' faces either before or after they speak.[63] The complementary visual modes of portraiture and landscape, both of which invite contemplative viewing, formally represent the

[59] Peter Braun, 'Von Europa erzählen. Über die Konstruktion der Erinnerung in den Dokumentarfilmen von Volker Koepp', in *DDR – erinnern, vergessen. Das visuelle Gedächtnis des Dokumentarfilms*, ed. Tobias Ebbrecht et al, (Marburg: Schüren, 2009), 71–91, 71.

[60] Volker Koepp, *Memelland* (Berlin: Edition Salzgeber, 2010) [on DVD],

[61] Stefan Reinecke, 'Das Land, das einfach verrostete', in *TAZ*, 28 January 2010, 15.

[62] Koepp, interview with Rainer Rother, 26:30.

[63] Ibid., 32:45.

bond between land and inhabitants that transcends temporary change. Thus the films convey an emotional yearning for the *longue durée* of belonging and resistance to forces of modernizing homogenization. Thus in *Uckermark*, von Arnim refers to the twenty-two generations of his family who have lived in the region, and Graf von Hahn emphasizes the relationship of the aristocratic families with their land, seeing their re-acquisition of the estate as a 'Fortführung der unterbrochenen Zeit' ('continuation of interrupted time') (*U*, 18:13). In terms heavy with spiritual resonance, he describes their 'innere Beziehung zur Landschaft. Man identifiziert sich mit einer Landschaft' ('inner relationship to the landscape. One identifies with a landscape') (*U*, 1:00:00).

A potentially dissonant voice in *Uckermark* is the actor and director, Fritz Marquardt. He speaks of his allegiance to communism as part of the post-War desire for radical change from National Socialism (*U*, 1:31:15). His allusion to the Nazi period and the desire for change is in stark contrast to the negative view of the GDR and collectivization expressed by the von Hahns and the two old farmers, who see it as a violent rupture with continuity and as an aberration, albeit in different ways. IN contrast, Marquardt is adamant that the reunification of the two Germanies represents 'die absolute Restoration' ('an absolute restoration') (*U*, 1:31:50), an ironic reversal of the communist monument celebrating the transition of 'Junkerland in Bauernhand' ('Junkers' land in farmers' hand'). The historical shifts from pre to post 1945, and then post 1989 are for Marquardt like shifts through different dramatic genres. In answer to Koepp's question, 'komisch mit der Geschichte, nicht?' ('history's a funny one, isn't it?'), his response forms the last words of the film: 'Ja, ja. Ein Mal als Tragödie, und dann als Komödie, und dann: Tragikomödie' ('Yes, yes. First it's tragedy, then it's comedy, and then: tragicomedy') (*U*, 1:42:00).

Marquardt's answer plays into Koepp's hands. History is shifted from the realm of political and social responsibility and conflict and finds resolution in a compromise artistic

genre: a bit of tragedy here, a bit of comedy there and a balanced synthesis in tragicomedy. This is characteristic of much of his work, in which the question of responsibility for violence and atrocity is neutralized through his emphasis on harmony and the individual. Koepp focuses on the specific and consequently loses sight of the universal: he refuses political or structural analysis of events, concentrating instead on personal stories. Thus Koepp's work is fundamentally monologic despite the multiplicity of voices. Comic devices, although they give rise to an optimistic humanism at the individual level, nevertheless complement the melancholy awareness of a lost past.

Conclusion

When Benjamin refers to comedy as the lining of the coat of mourning, he draws our attention to its necessary role as part of a painful healing process. Paul Ricoeur and LaCapra both argue for the importance of the work of mourning, or 'working-through', resisting the notion that it is tantamount to a form of closure which involves turning away from the past.[64] And like Benjamin, both recognise the importance of comedy and laughter for responding to trauma and loss. Ricoeur insists upon the importance of gaiety and humour for countering *acedia*, the 'complaisance towards sadness', and LaCapra argues that the 'carnivalesque, along with the comic and the grotesque in general, is also a significant counterpart to the sublime, which helps to question it and bring it down to earth.'[65] However, as is evident from the work involved in mourning, this is not an easy or pacifying process. Indeed, arguably the healing

[64] LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 53–54; Ricoeur, *Memory*, 69–80.

[65] LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 84.

potential of comedy springs from its 'interpretative openness' and its disturbing demand for different perspectives, even while these encourage change.[66]

Fassbinder's films are disturbing in different ways, not least because the troubling past pervades his films. Personal suffering is represented as a symptom of the wider economic systems of social and economic exchange that are inseparable from Nazism and its legacy. The overlap of personal suffering and the legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust is on occasion made explicit, most obviously in the figure of Biberkopf in the slaughter house with the piles of dead bodies that are reminiscent of the piles of dead Jewish corpses in the extermination camps. The brazenness and camp hyperbole of this imagery draws attention to the way in which the Holocaust suffuses debates around representations of suffering and it offers a visual and emotional riposte to Holocaust kitsch. Yet while Fassbinder's hyperbolic representation of the suffering German body self-consciously thematizes the question of German suffering, a further disturbance lingers: for no clear resolution is offered and it remains unclear how far Fassbinder indulges the comparison of German suffering with the suffering of the victims of Nazism or questions it. At another level, the sheer overindulgence in misery disturbs melodramatic conventions that depend upon eliciting spectator identification with suffering. The often ludicrous comedy refuses the solipsism of extreme suffering as well as the unreflected identification with those who suffer. Thus the jostling perspectives encouraged by comedy set a limit to the 'theatre of satisfaction' staged by melodrama and the comic excess of Fassbinder's style ensures that the spectator cannot indulge the identification that is undoubtedly invited. Rather, she is explicitly invited to reflect upon her own pleasure attendant upon vicariously assuming the victim position through identification and to question the enjoyment that she derives from the representation of another's pain. At the same time,

[66] Michael Mulkay, *On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 219.

however, comedy's play with perspective means that suffering need not be belittled or objectified.

Koepp's films address a disturbing past in as far as the director gives his subjects the space to recount their memories. Many of them testify to various types of suffering, much of which is profound. Yet the disturbing past figures only at the level of this personal testimony. The comic edge to his work does not serve to irritate but to endear the subjects to the viewer, to make them more accessible and to evoke our empathy towards them. Furthermore, the subjects' personal experience is placed within the slowly changing landscape, with harmful events moved to the realm of an abstracted, long durée of 'history' and hence away from questions of responsibility and agency. Thus Koepp's films address the disturbing past at a resolutely personal level in order to be conciliatory in the present. Here comedy reinforces rather than limits definable directorial aims, forming part of a textual strategy that bolsters particular modes of identification and the values that are associated with them.

If the ongoing disturbance of the past can be understood as belonging to the work of mourning, then it is those aspects of comedy that thrive on and contribute to indeterminacy that make it significant in relation to representations of suffering. Comedy has about it the indeterminacy of play, and with it an element of unpredictability: what is amusing or funny for some is not so for others, nor does the reader or spectator always understand why she finds something comic. It is by remaining a playful irritant that comedy can negotiate suffering, not by elevating it through tragic catharsis but celebrating rather the 'permanent suspension, postponement or parody of catharsis'.[67]

[67] Simon Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 230.