

THE AFRICAN TWIN TOWERS

UNVEILING THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF'S
LATE FILM WORK

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In 1999, during one of Christoph Schlingensiefel's appearances in the German talk show "Grüner Salon" (N-TV), journalist Erich Böhme blamed the director, political performer and dramatic author for having invited Horst Mahler, an (in)famous member of the far right party NPD², to give a public speech at the Berlin *Volksbühne*. The interview soon became very tense. But during this short conflictual exchange, Schlingensiefel made a remarkable statement about broadcasted pictures, the material body and the political.

- Böhme: "Don't you run the risk of promoting the right-wing scene? After all, they could say, 'Aha! He even includes us in his performance. He gives Mahler, who's closely linked to the NPD, excellent publicity!'"

- Schlingensiefel [interrupting Böhme]: "Mr Böhme, I didn't want to say this, but when you, in your show... that was interesting... I had Mr Mahler and Mr Oberlercher³ down here at the *Volksbühne*, on the stage – and one could jump on the stage, and some people actually did. And Oberlercher shouted at some point, 'Leibstandarte, Leibstandarte!'⁴ and whatever else. This man is completely nuts. This man is running on empty. Mr Mahler is also running on empty. They are all people who are running on empty. And I'm absolutely not."

- B.: "But why do you put them on the stage?"

- S.: "But sitting in your show, Mr Böhme, was Mr Haider.⁵ And you just played with your glasses while asking in a jokey way, 'Are you a populist? Are you a neonazi?' Right? And I was sitting in front of my television screen, I was sitting there – and I wished I could put my hand inside the television! I thought, 'That just can't be true. What is the man doing? What's up with Mr Böhme now?'"

[...]

- B.: "Why do you give Mahler the stage here at the theatre?"

- S.: "Why do you give Haider the stage without defending yourself? Down there, people could get close [to Mahler and Oberlercher]. I always ensure that one can get close to the people [who are on the stage] in my performances."⁶

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, the German *enfant terrible* of theatrical and film creation Christoph Schlingensiefel presented the first version of his *Animatograph*. This was a rotating stage made of objects, projections and performances and was the centerpiece of his direction of *Parsifal* at the Bayreuther Festspiele. Later, he installed different variations of this multimedia device in various places in the world, one example being *Area 7*, a township of the Namibian city of Lüderitz.

The *Animatograph* has given rise to several analyses focusing on the aesthetic, political, philosophical and historical issues of the device.⁷ However, while working on the installation of the *Animatograph* in Namibia, Schlingensiefel also made a film, which documented his failed attempt to shoot a free adaptation of Wagner's *Ring* in this former German colony. Finally released in 2008 under the title *The African Twin Towers*, this documentary proved to be Schlingensiefel's last film, with the director dying of cancer just two years later. Overshadowed by the impressive and ambitious theatrical and multimedia mother-project, *The African Twin Towers* has received less analytical debate, particularly about its role as a documentary film or project.⁸ This article reconsiders the documentary as part of Schlingensiefel's film work, looking at both its crucial contribution to a global reflection on German cinema and its impact on nonfiction film in a post-modern context.

When confronted with *The African Twin Towers* (2008), spectators are first impressed by the director's ability to undermine all categories, genres and discursive regimes the documentary might claim to belong to. Although announced in the title as a *Tagebuchfilm* (a filmed diary), it barely follows a structure organized by dates. Similarly, after the first collapse of his original project – his attempt to organize the *Bach* or *Wagner Festspiele* in Namibia – Schlingensiefel makes the decision to rewrite the project as a succession of different remakes. Yet, even before it gains any systematicity, this intention vanishes too; the only obvious – but nevertheless very partial – remake the audience is able to recognize is the approximate restaging of some scenes of the cult B movie *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965) or of Conrad Rooks' autobiographical *Chappaqua* (1966). Finally, what looks like a DVD-bonus of a disjointed movie, also leaves viewers with the undeniable fact that the original film will forever remain missing. To put it in a nutshell, Schlingensiefel's *The African Twin Towers* is a chaotic 'making-of documentary' of a project that never existed at all, at least in a conventional filmic version. Unlike the famous *Lost in La Mancha* (Keith Fulton & Louis Pepe, 2002) about Terry Gilliam's aborted project, or Herzog's mesmerizing

Fata Morgana (1971) that came out of a failed film shoot, *The African Twin Towers* is not the sublimating vestige of a failure; it is the staging of this very failure.

One could argue that this filmed diary is, as other previous films by the same director, a work about destruction, and specifically a film about the destruction of conventional cinema and its production tools and methods: the script is lost after a few days of the film shoot and, instead of directing his actors, Schlingensief runs around the set, shouting barely understandable instructions at them. Further, a casting that is haphazardly organized after several days, turns out to be a useless pastiche of improvised auditions. Finally, the director himself confesses that he probably never knew what this entire project was actually about. Facing such an apparently unstructured chaos, cinephile spectators or analysts are led to conclude that Schlingensief's film should be included in a history of aesthetic and political subversion based on the irreverent rejection and destruction of past and actual conventions, of professional technological tools, of German film history, and certainly of the artistic legacy of New German cinema every German director has had to cope with since the eighties.⁹

However, suppressing our perplexity in that way would make us miss the point that beyond his destructive/subversive gesture, the director of *The African Twin Towers* is still a superior, omniscient commentator who, via a voice-over recorded three years after the chaotic shoot, contextualizes and reads his pictures, sometimes in an amused manner, sometimes in a distressed tone. If this film is about the destruction of conventional cinema (whatever this may mean), it nevertheless relies on the position of an ironical, superior, and sometimes apparently cynical director. In short, in Schlingensief's film the destruction of conventional cinema implies the preservation of the classical designer and orchestrator of this destruction.¹⁰

It is this very opposition between the destruction of ordinary cinematographic and historical conventions on the one hand, and the preservation of a superior director or orchestrator on the other hand, that I would like to challenge in the present paper. For this purpose, I will first identify some of the many ironical references to other films which *The African Twin Towers* is saturated with: by examining these, I will see if the hypothesis of a superior director who consciously plays around with film history, canonic art, and classical conventions of auctorial representation through intertextual moves can be confirmed. In the second part of the paper, these references will be re-evaluated through an extended analysis of what is being represented in the scenes in which Fassbinder's iconic actress Irm Hermann plays a leading role. This analysis reconsiders Schlingensief's last film as a crucial non-fictional representation of his characters' and actors' bodies and challenges the assumption of him being a cynical director. In the third and last part of this essay, I will look more closely at a central and very tangible motif in the film: the wrapping,

veiling and covering of the bodies present on the screen. This motif will enable me to circumscribe what conception of reality the director in fact advocates, assuming the image of a superior, cynical or, at least, ironical author is now rejected.

All three sections of this text will be introduced by a simple but nevertheless crucial question to help explore what *The African Twin Towers* is about. The question is this: if *The African Twin Towers* is a documentary, what does it show?

SATURATION, IRONY AND THE CYNICAL SPECTATOR

One way to answer this apparently straightforward question is to recall once again we are dealing with a film that is constituted by dense web of references and variations on intertextual allusions. These range from direct topical quotes from Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) (Schlingensiefel wants to build a rotating ship-opera stage in the Namibian desert) to a sardonic homage to Fassbinder's approach of a shoot that has gone wrong (*Warnung vor einer heiligen Nutte*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1971). Pictures range from those akin to *Fata Morgana* to ambiguous references to pop culture: for example, the bombshell of the unexpected appearance of Patti Smith towards the end of the film. Likewise, sources range from Germanic mythological texts to opaque allusions to the events of 9/11. As a consequence, *The African Twin Towers* can easily induce a reflexive stance: the analyst in search for readability will first consider Schlingensiefel's film as a web of intertextual references that desacralize or demystify the director's artistic, historical and political influences and backgrounds.

However, rather than identify each quote or allusion, I would like to highlight the process of quoting itself. I will do this by focusing on one of the most recurrent references in *The African Twin Towers*, namely Werner Herzog's visual work. My aim is not only to show how Schlingensiefel's saturated web of allusions eventually sets him in a mocking position towards the famous director, but also to outline the kind of spectators such a position tends to encourage.

As previously mentioned, Schlingensiefel wants to transport an old ship through the Namibian desert and to construct his rotating stage in a forsaken post-colonial environment. Therefore, he seeks the help of local participants who do not seem to understand what all this is about. The reference to Fitzcarraldo's project is obvious.¹¹ However, Schlingensiefel pushes the allusions to Herzog's oeuvre further by disseminating numerous secondary hints in his film. Among others, I can mention the permanent presence of a dwarf, who is artificially sexualized by a grotesque and self-negating latex catsuit; the carnival-like processions Schlingensiefel tries to stage with barely controllable locals; and a car that drives in circles around the actors with the purpose to surround

the crew with Wagner's *Rheingold*. Each of these ideas are recurrent themes in Herzog's cinema. This demystifying play with references reaches a kind of climax in Schlingensief's statement about the overall project of his film: "It's what we're doing here, taking the mountain across the boat" he declares in his voice-over commentary. With this short sentence, the director not only mocks Herzog's 1982 feature film; he also demystifies the very basis of his quest for fictional authenticity by increasing *ad absurdum* the director's attempts to blur the distinction between reality (of the film shoot) and realism.

All these references to *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* (1971), *Stroszeck* (1972), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *Cobra Verde* (1987) and other Herzog films, undergo a process of estrangement due to multiple transformations, distortions and exaggerations. As a consequence, Schlingensief appears as the irreverent heir of some leading figures of the so called New German Cinema, an ambiguous role the director born in Oberhausen in 1960 has repeatedly embraced throughout his career.¹² Furthermore, his disrespectful stance towards some canonic elements of film history is also echoed in other polemical stances towards his own country's historiography. To take but one example, Schlingensief reimports the highly politicized "total work of art" of Wagner (that can become Bach as well in the film) along with the history-laden character of Hagen von Tronje in the former German and Lutheran colony of Lüderitz. In doing so, he puts back into play some key elements of German history and culture in order to create a historical multilayered and sometimes ideologically obscene chaos that seems to come straight out of the overloaded memory of an amnesic or blind creator. Indeed, by explicitly addressing the elephant in the room of German nationalism and colonization, without even seeming to be aware that there is an elephant, Schlingensief plays an awkward, clumsy and simple-minded western author who does not understand how inconvenient his behaviour is.

The cinephile spectators of *The African Twin Towers* may react to this mess of irreverent and politically incorrect allusions in one of two ways. The first is that they may feel distinctly uncomfortable with the naive freedom of the director since this deprives them of the possibility of the use of irony in shying away from major issues in political or historical terms. Observing Schlingensief running around as a German director in Lüderitz, wearing a safari-like cowboy hat and making fun of unemployed locals who dream of a better future in the Western film industry, could be considered to be extremely problematic. This reaction has credibility: Schlingensief's creations have always generated radical disapproval.

The second reaction to *The African Twin Towers* is one where spectators will play the game and share a knowing smile with its creator, enjoying the free, provocative and iconoclastic references to various cultural and political legacies. As a corollary, those spectators will resist any

primary or first-degree reception of the film and just relish the experience of being part of a particularly complex and satisfying patchwork of countless historical and intertextual threads.

Clearly, it is almost impossible to draw a demarcation line between disapproval of and amused commitment to Schlingensiefel's provocative creations: throughout his career, his theatre plays, performances and films often met with ambiguous receptions that contributed to the director's international success. Nevertheless, in what follows I would like to focus on the second of these reactions, one which can easily be linked to a broader postmodernist paradigm. Indeed, the pastiche-like homage to some authors, the historical trivializing allusions, and the pervasive mix of lower and higher cultural references (for example, the encounter of *Fitzcarraldo* and *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*) seem to call for a reception of the film that focuses on the work's self-reflexivity and the self-sufficient complicity between director and spectators.¹³ Yet, in order to avoid endless debates on postmodernist cinema and, most importantly, to reflect on the political implications of such a reception, I would like to read this complicity in the light of another theoretical framework, one that enables us to better assess how far the ironical distortion of references actually calls for *cynical* spectators.

In his first long philosophical essay, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk describes contemporary society as marked by a generalized cynicism, a statement that echoes – and tears to pieces – the Adornian diagnosis of a “generalized coldness,”¹⁴ a cynicism that cannot be opposed by the preservation of a sentient and suffering subject anymore.¹⁵ According to Sloterdijk, his time is indeed marked by a counter-critical generalized “knowing smile,” a “false consciousness” with which every subject can resist a too complex reality:

It is the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers. There even seems to be something healthy in this attitude, which, after all, the will to self-preservation generally supports. [...] Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered.¹⁶

Sloterdijk describes the modern cynical subjects as social actors who have learnt to live in contemporary society, not *despite of*, but *thanks to* its assumed contradictions. They have learned to adapt to society by resisting and voluntarily suppressing every attack of some higher critique.

Their strategy is simple: by knowing that they are intellectually able to activate this critique whenever they want to, they actually never do. As a result, they can be described as schizoid figures which survive thanks to a permanent contradiction or inner conflict that does not affect their moral solidity or capacity of (re)action anymore. According to the philosopher, modern cynicism as a generalized tool of self-oppression can thus nip critique and emancipation in the bud since the modern cynic is able to cope with any fundamental contradiction:

Cynicism proceeds by way of a diffusion of the subject of knowledge, so that the present-day servant of the system can very well do with the right hand what the left hand never allowed. By day, colonizer, at night, colonized; by occupation, valorizer and administrator, during leisure time, valorized and administered; officially a cynical functionary, privately a sensitive soul; at the office a giver of orders, ideologically a discussant; outwardly a follower of the reality principle, inwardly a subject oriented toward pleasure; [...]. With the enlightened integrated person – in this world of clever, instinctive conformists – the body says no to the compulsions of the head, and the head says no to the way in which the body procures its comfortable self-preservation. This mixture is our moral status quo.¹⁷

Needless to say, a thorough understanding of the subtle distinctions between postmodern irony and cynical reason should be theorized at some point. This would help identify how political (or indeed unpolitical) postmodernist spectators – insofar as such a heterogeneous category could be circumscribed – can remain.¹⁸ However, in the limited framework of this article, I would like to suggest that the spectators of *The African Twin Towers* can become “modern cynics” when they engage with Schlingensief’s play with cultural references. Like the modern cynical subject, they are indeed able to position themselves ambiguously and to deal ironically with their own critical conscience. They know that they are not fooled by the author’s provocative treatment of German history and cultural references, but for this very reason, they are also in a position in which their higher awareness makes it possible for them to play along with the director. To put it simply: they share a “knowing laughter” with the author that pushes them out of any real critical reflexive process.¹⁹ Consequently, one could say that the spectators’ critical and reflexive handling of the potentially polemical historical and ideological components of *The African Twin Towers* is a major facilitating factor of the status quo.²⁰

It is certainly the case that several works by Christoph Schlingensief, if not the majority, rely on the critical potential of recycling and ironically exceeding cultural references.²¹ Indeed, as previously shown, *The African Twin Towers* is no exception to this rule. Through exacerbation, de-

or transfiguration, and grotesque restaging of cultural canonical references of modern film history, Schlingensiefel explores an approach that departs both from some major documentary traditions and from a part of the film history to which he inevitably belongs himself.

In this first section of my article, I have argued that such a playing around with a cultural heritage runs the risk of feeding the spectators' passivity and promoting a self-misled consciousness. However, beside the fact that in my own experience of the film something has definitely resisted a cynical reception, encouraging me to persevere with my search for another possible understanding of Schlingensiefel's last documentary, this first approach to the film creates a twofold problem. First, it ignores Schlingensiefel's assertion that an artwork should never be a matter of "Textverständlichkeit" (text comprehensibility), as he claimed metaphorically in one of his numerous interviews with Alexander Kluge.²² Secondly, and more decisively, reading *The African Twin Towers* as a postmodern documentary that calls for cynical spectators, would equally miss the point: Schlingensiefel's creative process has always been driven by the primary belief that every artistic performance can change our experience of life, as he stated a couple of months before his death in an interview for the German television program *Aspekte* (2010).²³ Hence, in order to understand how the film can be understood, in spite of its apparently self-sufficient and (self-) iconoclastic reflexivity, I will try to answer this very simple question again in the next section: what does the film actually show? This time, however, I will switch my focus from the obvious saturation and superposition of cultural references to another process of saturation which is visually central to the documentary: the multiple coverings of bodies by clothes, accessories and makeup.

IRM HERMANN UNVEILED

After a mysterious opening shot showing a man with a wig walking along the edge of a cliff in the Namibian desert, the first scene of the film introduces the spectator to the private apartment of the director a couple of hours before the film crew takes off. At this moment, his living-room is still a disarray of hundreds of costumes. Schlingensiefel comments:

I don't know. I'm excited, we're starting soon. Costumes? [addressing an assistant] What's this? The place is a mess! Who's been here? What a mess. Crazy. [voice-over] Shall I say what this is? My place, Schwedter Strasse, the living room. There is stuff everywhere. Aino has dumped everything here, the costumes to take along.

This focus on costumes in the first scene introduces the theme of the second. After having tried to discuss a first sketch of his script that mixes up German mythology and a complex oppositional encounter between the Wagner and the Bach families in a VIP lounge of the airport, Schlingensiefel accompanies his crew to the departure lounge. Nobody seems to know exactly where to go or what to do. But again, despite the chaos that prevails, the director thinks the situation is worth filming. Indeed, in his voice-over commentary, he elaborates on the oddest element of the scene: while waiting, the actors are wearing costumes.

It was important that they act out their roles in costume and were filmed during preparation and while we were thinking things up. So I look like the sloppy director from a really bad movie here. Running around like that is embarrassing enough. Embarrassment is part of exposing yourself to hardship, not knowing the part you're going to play.

According to my first approach to the film, this quite grotesque opening of *The African Twin Towers* can be read as a new mockery of Werner Herzog's (and several modern authors') immersive method to reach authenticity or a higher degree of realism by blurring the boundaries between staged fiction and the reality of the set. Moreover, it also mocks some star-directors – Schlingensiefel mentions Verhoeven and Wenders while entering the plane wearing a cowboy hat and a silk scarf – who tend to cultivate a recognizable public appearance. However, the centrality of costumes right from the start also points to other costumes, wigs, face-paintings and eye patches that abound in the film and encourages me to contemplate the opening scene with a broader interpretative scope. Schlingensiefel indeed saturates the entire film with all kinds of body covering accessories and techniques. As a consequence, every actor is exposed to a process of estrangement that turns her or him into a grotesque character. For example, Karin Witt, in the role of the mythological dwarf Edda, becomes an unlikely S&M mistress, while Norbert Losch, embodying Hagen von Tronje, has to wear an eye-patch. The director himself is no exception to the rule, as he is totally ridiculed by his explorer-cowboy-reporter costume. This abundance of different costumes reaches a climax in a scene which shows Schlingensiefel running around among shouting children in an impoverished suburb of Lüderitz while wearing a penguin costume. This scene will be further explored later on in the article.

In the light of my first reading of the film, this profusion of costumes could be understood as just another expression of the multiple layers of representations and references. Indeed, at first sight, the bodies of Schlingensiefel's characters undergo a destructive process of covering: once again, this profusion could be said to turn a critical satire into an uncritical pastiche, a process that

might confirm the director's and his complicit spectators' cynical postures. However, following the dialectical structure I have previously introduced, I would like to explore another hypothesis which is based on a possible resistance to the cynical posture this saturation seems to induce. In order to achieve this, I will concentrate in the rest of this section on the fate of one specific actress in the film, Irm Hermann. Best known as being Fassbinder's iconic star, she embodies the German cinematographic heritage Schlingensief mockes and partly destroys in his film. In this way, she can be perceived as a living reference.

In *The African Twin Towers*, Irm Hermann has to wear different costumes. Some of them seem to suit her well and come into line with her slow way of moving in every possible situation; such costumes, nevertheless, emphasize her odd presence as a kind of lost bourgeois tourist or carnival queen in various improbable film locations. This treatment of the former star of New German Cinema goes hand in hand with a general process of ridicule that is particularly highlighted in one scene, shot in a bar, and which is introduced by the director's statement that he "mistrusts conventional cinema." Schlingensief's commentary displays his mocking and superior posture towards his own pictures and the actors he has almost fooled:

There are films that leave a deep impression, but I can't stand these German films from the nineties and eighties which are so pretentious desperately trying for authenticity. I don't believe in that at all.

Then he goes on with an ambiguous statement about the possible link between the grotesque and (in)authenticity:

Authenticity...inauthenticity can be just letting go of yourself... Look at that. Irm Hermann wouldn't put that on her casting tape. I often produce images no actor would put in his casting tape.

In other scenes, however, this transformation into a grotesque character produces an effect that goes far beyond the sole superior mockery of an almighty director. The effect is jarring and sits uneasily with the audience. In this respect, Hermann's appearances in spandex leggings during Schlingensief's desperate restaging of some scenes of the erotic action film *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* are startling. Putting it mildly, Irm Hermann's transformation into Tura Satana is a complete failure. Instead of reminding us of the energetic but trashy ex-gogo dancer, her appearances in the remake scenes of Russ Meyer's cult film draw our attention to the incongruity of her presence,

accentuating her phlegmatic way of moving and her typical Bavarian accent. Furthermore, in contrast with a postmodernist Tarantino-like recycling of older popular references, Schlingensiefel's repeated casting of the famous actress with too tight clothes and filmic allusions to characters she obviously cannot embody anymore, has one concrete effect: the spectator is confronted with the crude reality of Irm Hermann's aging body. To put it shortly, by covering and dressing her body in inappropriate clothes, Schlingensiefel manages to expose her. As a consequence, if spectators still share a knowing laughter with the director, they also must deal with the profilmic coarse reality of her body.²⁴

On at least one occasion, this resistance to a cynical reception of the film is confirmed by the actress herself. During the shooting of one of Russ Meyer's scenes, she interrupts her performance, filled with shame:

I think I'll go mad soon. I'm ready for the loony bin. Really. Really. It's so embarrassing! This is no use for me. I'll be ruined for life. I can't go on with this.

Of course, this interruption won't last long, and soon, the actress goes on with the filming. Yet through her refusal to play the part any longer, Hermann has temporarily become a distancing commentator of her situation. In so doing, she has adopted a posture that until that moment was held only by Schlingensiefel himself.

In sum, we can identify three steps. First, Irm Hermann is a body steeped in (her) film history. Second, this total identification of the actress as an individual with her film history is destroyed and replaced with a new role: she is now repeatedly dressed in unexpected and ill-suited clothes (referring to films she never played in) and is required to act in an artificial and grotesque manner. Third, this immersion in her new role finally reveals what has all the time existed under her multiple representations of herself: her body. In *The African Twin Towers*, the former Fassbinder actress is thus a palimpsest which undergoes a paradoxical process of unveiling through the multiple veils she carries with her.

At this juncture, then, a second way of answering the central question "what does the film show?" could thus simply be: real bodies, paradoxically revealed in their primary concrete and visual nature through the considered use of multiple coverings. Needless to say, this new understanding of the film flies in the face of a classical postmodernist approach. Yet I am confident that the above analysis of Irm Hermann's appearances in *The African Twin Towers* sheds a new light on the first contradiction between the free destruction of conventional film and the preservation of a superior position as orchestrator of this destruction. Although Schlingensiefel frees

himself of his German modern cinematographic legacy through his mocking treatment of Hermann, her body, replete with her film history, is also an element of resistance: it has the capacity to question Schlingensiefel's superiority. Irrespective of the authenticity of Irm Hermann's refusal to fulfill the erratic intentions of the director, these moments of resistance indeed tackle the director's ability to play ironically with all the references and bodies he has decided to put in his film.

In this second section of my article, I have suggested that the complex treatment of Irm Hermann in the film undermines the credibility of the counter-productive cynical approach. Hermann's resistance to the superior orders of an almighty director shows that the potentially cynical message generated by an overloading of references is thrown into doubt by the exposition, or the "baring" effect, this overloading finally leads to.²⁵ However, if this resistance to a cynical play with the past and its norms partly prevents the knowing-laughter cinephile spectators could share with a superior director, it is nevertheless the result of an authorial choice, one which confirms rather than weakens Schlingensiefel's control of the film. This being so, in the last part of this text I would like to further find out if the director also exposes himself through a similar process of veiling and unveiling. This is a final piece of evidence which I present in order to disprove the validity of the cynical approach. To that end, I will take a closer look at the director's role itself by formulating a third version of my recurring question: what does the director show of himself? Does he remain untouched by the chaotic covering and uncovering of references, clothes and roles? Or is he exposed too, deprived of his superior and mocking power over his actresses and actors, as well as the entire cultural legacy he has decided to shake off?

SELF-ESTRANGEMENT

In the middle of the film, Schlingensiefel's Namibian enterprise documented by *The African Twin Towers* is about to collapse. The director leaves his collaborators, confesses that the entire project was a mistake, and calls his assistant to suggest that all crew members should go home. Staged or authentic, this scene advocates the total failure of his project. In view of Schlingensiefel's characteristic obstinacy, and despite the mess the film is since its very start, this surrender hits the spectators as a surprise. Interestingly, this moment of total despair is simultaneous with the director's decision to take off the costumes he has worn until then: wigs, hats and other accessories are discarded. In ordinary clothes, he finally walks to a deserted coast. Once more, this scene reminds us of Werner Herzog's cinema, more precisely of Cobra Verde's final attempt to drag an impossibly heavy boat into the waves before abandoning himself to the African sea. But, despite its high level of intertextuality, both filmic and symbolic, this scene also resists purely referring

either to the film itself or to German cinema more generally. As a matter of fact, the director leaves the spectator with an authentic and somehow awkward feeling that he is actually really collapsing. This feeling is partly determined by Schlingensiefel's voice-over. Until this moment, his filmed monologues straight to the camera and the comments he recorded in 2008 were either separated (see, for example, his first statement about the possible failure of the project)²⁶ or countered through distancing contrapuntal contrasts, as his comment of the penguin scene shows:

All this pressure to have to tell a story and my own refusal... I didn't want to incite anti-colonialism. I don't want to make a film against colonial times, as I'd earlier told some press lady, that I was intending to say sorry to the Herero. Who do I think I am? See the Herero and say sorry for German crimes? It would make the headlines, that's it. I increasingly reject all that. Playing the fool, like in this silly penguin costume. It all plays a part. I could have used an actor. All this self-rejection, making a fool of oneself... It's not fatalistic or lethargic, though.

But when he finally interrupts the filming to walk alone to the sea, his commentary doesn't induce any ironical or self-distancing posture towards his footage anymore:

I increasingly withdrew, abandoned the team. Didn't get on with the cameraman anymore, then I went off into the desert with one of the camera ladies where I shot my own piece of film, which expressed how there was no point in going on. [calling his assistant on the phone; voice becomes "in"] Hi, it's me. Just wanted to say that I'm aborting the film... Just tell them they can pack up and leave. I've had it. There's no point in going on. I can't tell any stories. I don't want to look out for images to illustrate something.

When Schlingensiefel abandons the entire project, it is to shoot "[his] own piece of film." This verbalisation of his intention unambiguously reveals that the director can no longer identify with the role he was performing up until that moment. As a corollary, the enunciator who inflicted his ironical treatment on film history, cultural references, actors and finally on himself, no longer exists. The mocking director is unveiled; too many layers of conventions, requirements, and destructive mockery have finally exposed him. Over-immersion in his own ironic strategies has finally turned him into a bare, helpless and devastated man who cannot help but acknowledge that his refusal to accept some dramatic conventions was a way of hiding his inability to tell any stories. This shift from a superior commentator towards a basically despairing character is finally summed

up in Schlingensiefel's observation that he feels as if he is in the wrong place. This feeling of hopelessness is compounded by the news that his father is seriously ill. The director, lost in Africa, struggles to reach him by phone:

Even here I feel like the commissioner of misery. You can't cope with circumstances. You haven't prepared properly. You didn't determine the takes. You haven't done your homework hoping to find something incredible... Just as you start losing control... And with dad falling ill... And all these reasons to say: You poor guy!

In this seemingly final statement, Schlingensiefel confesses that he has failed to behave like a conventional film director. On the level of conventional film, nothing has emerged from his destructive gesture except the fact that his refusal of the classical role as a film director throws him into despair. However, this crucial moment of self-estrangement or dispossession of both his ability to play the role of a "good director" who has done "his homework," and his inability to be *another* kind of director, is suddenly interrupted by Patti Smith's unexpected arrival. The director welcomes the singer, his entire body covered with wet sand, and apologizes for having forgotten to take off his shoes. Interestingly, although he cries and explains how everything went wrong, Schlingensiefel seems at this moment to go beyond his crisis of self-estrangement. Patti Smith comforts her friend by reflecting philosophically on his feeling of spatial and temporal inadequacy. "Sometimes you are present and not present at all" she says. This observation seems to get the creative process back on track as the director finally announces: "And now, I show you the ship." This moment of rebirth, however, cannot be equated with a return to the director's initial superior position. Indeed, from now until the end of the film, he is no longer an exterior commentator who can ironically or critically look down at his pictures and actors. He has become a character who has undergone a process of total weakening and baring. He resumes his creative work convinced that sometimes it is better to be "not present at all."

I would like to suggest that through the successive processes of total immersion of self with cultural references or filmic roles, and corollary unveiling, Schlingensiefel stages himself in his last film as an artist who struggles with his own inadequacy: he expresses his own feelings of displacement and self-marginalization. In the words of Edward W. Said: he develops a *late style*.²⁷ We can, indeed, understand that *The African Twin Towers* is neither the climax of an ironical gesture, nor the breakdown of a subversive method that has become cynical in the sense used by Sloterdijk and which feeds the status quo. It is much more a moment of confrontation in which an author, instead of reaching his artistic maturity, tries to free himself. This attempt at escape is not

only from all artistic legacies, but also from his own institutionalization (and the risk of his subsequent transformation into an apolitical, cynical author). This final hypothesis enables me to reformulate my basic question. If the film shows the struggle of a filmmaker who tries to make a documentary while being oppressed by conventions and expectations, the question should thus be: what can a documentary show of a world in which every documentary approach, every character, every situation and every creative process is already laden with history, multiple references and pictures?

CODA

At the end of the film, in a retrospective monologue, Schlingensiefel imagines that a day will come when archeologists may unearth the remains of his “animatograph” and his ship:

Archaeologists will then excavate this place with bits of food and a boat, and they’ll say, ok, there’s been a river where boats could navigate. So this project can be used to distort history and produce a greater truth than the mind can process. That’s why it defies beauty. Because you can’t find closure.

Intentionally or not, the director’s words echo the closing scene of *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Werner Herzog, 1972), when the conquistador raves on his raft, filmed by a circling camera, imagining that he will marry his own daughter before “stag[ing] history like others stage plays.” At first glance, Schlingensiefel’s reflection on the possible falsification of history seems far-fetched and entirely determined by a kind of self-confident pathos. Moreover, this reflection is immediately negated by the last pictures of the film which accompany the end credits: it now becomes obvious that the *Animatograph*, along with the Namibian ship, was finally moved to a Western theater stage, the Burgtheater in Vienna. However, another understanding of his final statement is possible if we consider it as a way of putting, for one last time, a complex link with Herzog into play.

On one level, this final commentary refers to Herzog’s singular conception of filmic authenticity. The Bavarian director has repeatedly argued that his way of shooting films is opposed to other, modern forms of non-fiction films; he claims that his way expresses a higher degree of truth. To put it shortly, although Herzog may dismiss the suggestion, it can be said that he allows himself to transfigure recorded facts in the name of what he repeatedly called “ecstatic truth,”²⁸ a creative process that is obviously self-centered. In contrast, Schlingensiefel imagines that future significations of parts of his project do not belong to his creative work, but will be initiated by

others. Yet although the beliefs of Herzog and Schlingensief are opposed, they nevertheless both respond to one and the same quest for another order of authenticity and significance.

On a second, more general level, however, Schlingensief's final statement acknowledges that the signification of a representation can always be imagined anew. This is certainly true for the numerous references the director has distorted and mocked in *The African Twin Towers* in order to break with, as well as to perpetuate, a certain cinematographic, cultural and historical legacy. It also, however, applies to his own creations.

One last time: what can a documentary show? In this final stage of the analysis, I should now add a finer focus to the question, so that it now becomes: what can a documentary show when it has already been preceded by countless representations that ineluctably mediate our understanding of the real? This question has led other directors and intellectuals to posit a postmodernist paradigm, and the answer remains uncertain. Yet the search for an answer, as documented in this article, has eventually resulted in a simple conception of documentary cinema: the signification of every image will remain beyond the control of its designer and gain multiple significations over time. For this reason, documentary cinema should never be a matter of *Textverständlichkeit*, because every misinterpretation can be the vector of its survival through the ages. Without doubt, this conception is anything but cynical, because it negates the possibility of a final signification one could share with an almighty director, albeit blurred, ironical or self-referential. To that extent, *The African Twin Towers* can be understood as the cinematic (anti-)testament left by Schlingensief before his death. It problematizes the idea of an artistic legacy while showing, through a self-reflexive gesture that radically exposes the director as an uncertain and fragile creator, that the very idea of legacy should be reshaped. As a matter of fact, this (anti-)testament encourages us to think of documentary representation as a permanent *late style*, deprived of any final signification: it is a representation that is never at peace with itself because it continuously acknowledges an inadequacy to its time. For this very reason, it remains deeply political.

¹ The author wants to thank Lison Jousten (University of Liège) for her crucial contribution to the drafting of this text.

² Before joining the neo-Nazi party NPD, the lawyer Horst Mahler made his name in the early 1970s as one of the founders of the terrorist left radical group "Rote Armee Fraktion".

³ Reinhold Oberlercher is a far right essayist who started his political career as a leader of the far left students association SDS before becoming one of Germany's leading far right intellectuals.

⁴ The "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler" was a unit of the Waffen SS in charge of Adolf Hitler's personal protection.

⁵ Jörg Haider was an Austrian politician, founder of the conservative party BZÖ. He built part of his political success on populist, nationalist and xenophobic statements.

⁶ Erich Böhme, Christoph Schlingensiefel, *Grüner Salon*, n-tv, October 11, 1999, video, 00:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLctMayFURI>.

⁷ See e.g. : Sarah Hegenbart, “Psychic Interiors : Christoph Schlingensiefel’s Animatograph,” in *Art of Wagnis. Christoph Schlingensiefel’s Crossing of Wagner and Africa*, ed. Fabian Lehmann, Nadine Siegert, and Ulf Vierke (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2017) 89-100 ; Mirjam Schaub, “Burrowing into the Global Context : Schlingensiefel’s *Animatograph*, Read through Aristotle and Hegel,” in *Figura Cuncta Videntis. The All-Seeing Eye. Homage to Christoph Schlingensiefel*, ed. Eva Ebersberger, Daniela Zyman (Cologne: König, 2011), 31-51 ; Roman Berka, *Christoph Schlingensiefel’s Animatograph. Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit* (Vienna : Springer, 2011).

⁸ One of the few exceptions is Georg Seeßlen’s fascinating monograph *Der Filmemacher Christoph Schlingensiefel*. Georg Seeßlen, *Der Filmemacher Christoph Schlingensiefel* (Berlin : Getidan, 2015).

⁹ David Ashley Hughes, “Everything in Excess. Christoph Schlingensiefel and the Crisis of the German Left”, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 81, no. 4 (2006): 319-22, <https://doi.org/10.3200/GERR.81.4.317-339>.

¹⁰ Following Anna Teresa Scheer’s analysis of the early theater play *100 Jahre CDU* (1993), this “role as a master of ceremonies who oversees his theatrical spectacle” is at the roots of Schlingensiefel’s artistic and subversive work. But, unlike Scheer who argues that the author “encourag[es] situations in which the performers, including himself, lose control so that the ‘real’ momentarily eclipses the theatrical,” I would like to question the contradiction that emerges from the double game he plays when destroying and nevertheless preserving the very basis of the creative process. Anna Teresa Scheer, *Christoph Schlingensiefel. Staging Chaos, Performing Politics and Theatrical Phantasmagoria* (London: Methuen, 2018), 75.

¹¹ In April 2007, Schlingensiefel followed again in Herzog’s/Fitzcarraldo’s footsteps and directed Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman* at the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus.

¹² Schlingensiefel has regularly worked with iconic actors of New German Cinema (Volker Spengler, Margit Carstensen, Alfred Edel, Norbert Losch a.o.). He considered his polemical movie *Die 120 Tage von Bottrop* (1997) as an eccentric homage to Fassbinder. Additionally, he repeatedly claimed that his films were part of the tradition of New German Cinema. Georg Seeßlen, “Vom barbarischen Film zur nomadischen Politik,” in *Schlingensiefel! Notruf für Deutschland: Über die Mission, das Theater und die Welt des Christoph Schlingensiefel*, ed. Julia Lochte, Wilfried Schulz (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1998), 40-78.

¹³ In his 2005 critique about the project that will later give rise to *The African Twin Towers*, Thilo Thielke describes the director as someone who “gets high on himself” and is “doped by autologous blood.” Thilo Thielke, “Dada. Die Wüste lebt!,” *Der Spiegel*, November 21, 2005, 143.

¹⁴ This diagnosis underlies his 1966 seminal radio lecture “Education After Auschwitz.” In a letter to Alexander Kluge, Adorno mentions a never actually completed project, asserting that he is about to write an essay about coldness, a topic that “concerns [him] increasingly.” Theodor W. Adorno, letter to Alexander Kluge (13 May 1967), partially reproduced in: Alexander Kluge, “Vorwort,” in *Stroh im Eis* [booklet of *Wer sich traut reißt die Kälte vom Pferd*] (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 4; Theodor W. Adorno, “Education After Auschwitz”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191-204.

¹⁵ On Sloterdijk’s critique of the sentient and suffering subject as a basis of Critical Theory, see a.o. : Jeremy Hamers, “Au-delà de l’exil : la critique cynique de Peter Sloterdijk,” in *Le discours « néo-réactionnaire »*, ed. Pascal Durand, Sarah Sindaco (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2015), 347-58.

¹⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* [1983], trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 5.

¹⁷ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 113.

¹⁸ Again, I do not intend to investigate the obvious but also sometimes hidden links between a hypothetical postmodern subject and the modern cynical. Yet, to be sure, if the spectator of Schlingensiefel is a modern cynical subject, *The African Twin Towers* could be read as a parody “amputated of the satiric impulse,” that is to say a *pastiche*, according to Jameson’s famous distinction. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.

¹⁹ At first sight, this “knowing laughter” is inconsistent with Jameson’s observation about the *pastiche* that is “devoid of laughter.” However, the laughter my text is concerned with can actually be understood as a symptom of what Jameson called a “blank parody,” that is to say a parody without any source object. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 18.

²⁰ In the previously mentioned *Spiegel* article (see endnote 13), Thilo Thielke ends up presenting Schlingensiefel himself as absolutely able to compromise, a rebel but perfectly adapted to the norm, reminding

us of Sloterdijk's metaphorical description of the cynical subject: "[T]he present-day servant of the system can very well do with the right hand what the left hand never allowed." Thielke, "Dada. Die Wüste lebt!," 145; Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 113.

²¹ To take but one example, his very controversial performance *Bitte liebt Österreich* (2000) is based, as Tara Forrest has argued, on the critical translation of the *Big Brother* narrative into a methodology of migration policy, with the obvious purpose to turn the audience participation these programs latently generate into a new participation in the political debate. Furthermore, in her enlightening analysis of the film *Freakstars 3000* (2004), Forrest also tackles the issue of the possible conflict between political engagement and humor, reminding us of the fact that Schlingensiefel himself has explicitly problematized the risk of becoming a funny entertainer and thus an agent of the status quo. Tara Forrest, *Realism as Protest. Kluge, Schlingensiefel, Haneke* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 69-115.

²² Christoph Schlingensiefel, "In erster Linie bin ich Filmemacher! Begegnung mit Christoph Schlingensiefel," interview by Alexander Kluge, *10 vor 11*, dctp.tv, December 4, 2006, video, 12:55, <https://www.dctp.tv/filme/ich-bin-erster-linie-filmemacher/>. In this talk, Schlingensiefel also implicitly questions another tenet in my first reading of the film. According to him, handling memory is indeed first of all a matter of oblivion, deformation and transformation, as well as reconstructing new "synapses" between past elements. Schlingensiefel, Kluge, interview, 06:20.

²³ Christoph Schlingensiefel, "Ich will mein Sterben aushalten," interview, *Aspekte*, ZDF, April 17, 2009, video, 05:24, https://www.schlingensiefel.com/mediathek/flashvideo2.php?type=f4v&b=640&h=360&id=20090417_zdf_aspekte_640x360.

²⁴ Other scenes I won't develop further in this text also refer to this process of recovering the actor's bodies not only with different materials (see, for instance, the bar scene wherein the director runs from one actor to the next while sprinkling baby talc on their inert bodies) but also with older representations. The casting scene introduced by Stefan Kolosko explaining that he is looking for "Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush, Osama Bin Laden" and others, is another example of the omnipresent motif of covered bodies by prefigured representations.

²⁵ Alexander Kluge reminds us of the modern perspective that underlies Schlingensiefel's reworking of postmodern forms in his foreword to *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders*: "Schlingensiefel is open to all postmodern expressive forms, he likes to draw on this reservoir, but he grinds it through the mills of the modern." Alexander Kluge, "Foreword," in *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders*, ed. Tara Forrest, Anna Teresa Scheer (Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

²⁶ Lying on his bed, staring into his handheld amateur camera, he declares: "Total blackout in my head. It was stupid to try to create some kind of causality and tell a story. Kills of all the fun. Ruins everything."

²⁷ Following Said's reading of Adorno's reflection on the "Spätstil Beethovens," late works are symptomatic of a refusal of serene harmony that usually characterizes maturity. Fragmentary, unfinished and sometimes tormented, these works stay clear of their own present time and try to survive in a state of exile. Edward W. Said, *On Late Style. Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 6-8; Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven" [1937], in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564-68.

²⁸ Moreover, Schlingensiefel's closing commentary reminds us in multiple other ways of Werner Herzog's numerous statements about greater or higher truths in documentary cinema, for instance in his seminal manifesto "Minnesota Declaration." Earlier in the film, when Schlingensiefel complained about his "stupid[ity] to try to create some kind of causality and tell a story," he also declared that he felt "like some civil servant ['Verwaltungsbeamter'] working off his chores," a comparison that unavoidably reminds us of Herzog's denial of what he calls "the truth of accountants." Werner Herzog, "Minnesota Declaration. Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema. Lessons of Darkness," 1999, <https://www.wernerherzog.com/complete-works-text.html#2>.