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# Anke Feuchtenberger's Graphic Novel *Genossin Kuckuck* as Palimpsest: History, Memory, Violence, and Transformation

**Abstract:** Anke Feuchtenberger's autofictional graphic novel *Genossin Kuckuck* (2023) draws on personal memories and accounts from her family and is set in the fictional village of Pritschitanow spanning from the end of World War II to the present. Following an introduction to the author's work and its relationship to the feminist comic avant-garde, the article examines *Genossin Kuckuck* and shows that it is constructed as a multilayered, polyphonic palimpsest of stories about violence, injustice, and resilience across three generations of women. Uncovering the palimpsest structure of *Genossin Kuckuck* allows us to understand the complex and protracted composition of the book. The various story arcs and episodes connected by themes and leitmotifs are both following and parodying the compositional technique of the great modernist novel. As such, Feuchtenberger succeeds in creating a testament to the feminist comic avant-garde that has been reinvigorating the artform since the 1990s.

## I

The publication of Anke Feuchtenberger's latest graphic novel *Genossin Kuckuck – ein deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald* by Reprodukt in September 2023 marked both a significant milestone in her oeuvre and a rebirth of a feminist comic avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> In the spirit of this avant-garde, Feuchtenberger has always challenged her audience, her peers, and herself with a process of aesthetic transformation and formal evolution. In the 1990s, as art critic Peter Schjeldahl has noted, graphic novels as an avant-garde art form were "to many in their teens and twenties what poetry once was" (Schjeldahl 162). Comics, as Schjeldahl asserted, were once formally simple, easily consumable entertainment, while avant-gardes "are always cults of difficulty" (Schjeldahl 162). If "difficult" is used here as a cipher for "experimental" or "challenging" – to differentiate these comics from those released by mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> Rights to an English translation under the working title *Comrade Cuckoo* have been procured by Lucas Adams for New York Review Comics, who also published a translation of Feuchtenberger and Katrin de Vries' *Die Hure h as W the Whore*. Cf. Feuchtenberger and de Vries 2023.

publishing houses – then it fits the description of many graphic novels within this avant-garde. Rather than a “cult” the respective artists form a global culture composed of a network of synchronic and diachronic, as well as national and international relationships. Indeed, if the term avant-garde implies a form of challenge or rebellion against the old order, then this revolt is both overtly political and at the same time directed at renewing and reinventing the artform. Informed not just by other comics or literary texts, as Christian Gasser has observed, but also by TV, advertising, pop music, video clip aesthetics, video games and computer graphics, the various narrative styles employed by these avant-garde comic artists are shaped by collage, fragmentation, parody, discontinuity and repetition (Gasser 10). As varied as these styles are, they playfully embrace convention just as much as provocation, they oppose closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation (Hutcheon 27 et passim). German comic culture is also overtly political – Gasser speaks of its “unverblühten, manchmal agitatorischen Charakter” (Gasser 11). It keeps an ambivalent, somewhat antagonistic stance to “bourgeois” culture and is often deeply feminist – as exemplified in Feuchtenberger’s work.

Now regularly referred to as its “grande dame,”<sup>2</sup> Feuchtenberger has been a dominant figure of German language comic culture and the European comic avant-garde for over three decades. She began her career in East Berlin in 1988 at the *Produktionsgenossenschaft des Handwerks* (PGH) “Glühende Zukunft.” In the period following German reunification, she designed political posters and playbills for theater productions, drew illustrations for a feminist magazine, published her first strips and albums, and broke into the front row of comic artists with a short story in the comic magazine *Strapazin*’s 1993 special issue on Berlin.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, *Strapazin* was a platform for a young, international comic avant-garde, while Berlin functioned as the focal point of a budding German comic culture. This new culture brought together artists from West Germany, such as Hendrik Dorgathen, Martin tom Dieck, and Markus Huber, who were rooted in a particular “Western” comic tradition, and also from East Germany such as Feuchtenberger, Atak, or Henning Wagenbreth, who brought with them a completely different set of artistic, visual, and narrative influences.<sup>4</sup> Feuchtenberger quickly became a driv-

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2 As seen, for example, on the homepage of the Goethe Institute: [goethe.de/ins/lv/de/kul/sup/com/20477753.html?forceDesktop=1](http://goethe.de/ins/lv/de/kul/sup/com/20477753.html?forceDesktop=1). Last accessed May 14, 2025.

3 Biz Nijdam covered Feuchtenberger’s early work in her PhD thesis (Nijdam 2017); a recent overview of the various aspects of Feuchtenberger’s oeuvre and career can be found in Stuhlmann and Frahm.

4 In their interview with Feuchtenberger, Giordana Piccinini, Alessio Trabacchini, and Emilio Varrà ask her extensively about her influences as a young artist growing up in the GDR, i.e., removed from “Western” comic culture (Piccinini, Trabacchini, and Varrà).

ing force within this new culture and in 1999, she was featured in the groundbreaking exhibition “Mutanten” as one of just two female artists alongside eleven male colleagues from Germany and Switzerland.<sup>5</sup> Based on the strength of her publications in *Strapazin*, Feuchtenberger was invited to present her work at the 1996 Angoulême International Comics Festival where she forged relations with other avant-garde artists including Canadian Julie Doucet, Belgian Dominique Goblet and Israelis Rutu Modan and Yirmi Pinkus. In 2025, she returned to Angoulême once more, when *La Camarade Coucou*, the French translation of *Genossin Kuckuck*, was nominated for the festival's major award.

Since 1997 she has held a position as professor of drawing at Hamburg's University of Applied Sciences (Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften Hamburg/HAW). Together with her HAW-colleague and fellow *Strapazin*-contributor Stefano Ricci, Feuchtenberger founded her own publishing company, MamiVerlag, in 2007. In 2017, Feuchtenberger was invited to contribute a poster for an exhibition at the *Bundestag* on women's voting rights, and in 2018 she created a monumental altar for a museum of sacral art in Münster

## II

*Genossin Kuckuck*, with its octavo format, its 438 pages divided into forty-one chapters and a coda, its variety of media from charcoal to red and black ink, graphite and pencil, its black-and-gold cover design, and its golden edge-coloring, has the appearance of a volume of sacred scripture. Its subject matter is memory, in many different forms, both individual and collective, and it is an exploration of the collective subconscious, as much as it is a love letter to Western Pomerania – where Feuchtenberger grew up and lives to this day – its people, its complex history, and its natural world. “Es ist alles absolut wahr und es ist alles erfunden,” Feuchtenberger told interviewer Marina Knoben in March 2024 (Knoben). Feuchtenberger displays the fragmented nature and the uncertain truth-claims of memories by combining a variety of narrative approaches. The extensive autofictional work includes both fantastical and realistic elements.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Burkhard Müller wrote an early portrayal of Feuchtenberger for the catalogue of the “Mutanten” exhibition (99–108).

6 Glowing reviews for *Genossin Kuckuck* in many of the noteworthy German feuillets (see Hoffmann; Koopmann; Stillech) led to a nomination for the prestigious *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse* 2024 in the general fiction category. This nomination was the first for a comic. In 2023, Birgit Weyhe, a former student of Feuchtenberger's, but long since a master graphic storyteller in her own right, was nominated for *Rude Girl* in the non-fiction category.

Overall, the multiple storylines of *Genossin Kuckuck* are told in a non-linear way and punctuated by surreal, dreamlike, or mythical episodes. The book opens with a pact for life being made by best friends Kerstin and Effi, two teenagers growing up in the fictional village of Pritschitanow in the north-eastern corner of the German Democratic Republic in the 1960s.

But soon, their friendship is tested and their lives torn apart by forces beyond their control. The family backgrounds of both girls are problematic: Kerstin Grund grows up with only her older brother Jochen and her grandmother. The siblings' parents are largely absent, as they are "Helden im Dienste des Sozialismus. Sie sind nicht tot, aber weg" (*Genossin Kuckuck* 16). The siblings and grandmother live in the tiny old village school building where Kerstin's grandmother is also the headmistress and Russian teacher. Effi Mettel, on the other hand, lives with both her parents: her mother Rosi, whom Kerstin idolizes, and her father, hobby hunter Helmut "Waidgenosse" Mettel. Mother Rosi, however, harbors terrible secrets. The cast of main characters is completed by Frank Sternemann and Torsten Greiff, Kerstin's brother's two teenage friends. After the boys steal a pig's head from the local boneyard, they are institutionalized and brutally forced to fit the mold of the New Socialist Man.<sup>7</sup> The turmoil of the "Wende" years does not offer a chance to heal broken relationships but rather exacerbates the harm and the pain experienced earlier. Decades later, the enormous pigsty of the Socialist farmer's collective has been demolished and Rosi Mettel has built a home for senior citizens on its foundation. This is where Kerstin finds her grandmother, when she, like Frank and Torsten, returns to the village. Yet, while Kerstin seeks to reconnect with her grandmother, the men return to uncover who committed them to the institution for wayward teenagers and to exact revenge. Taken together, the storylines resemble a puzzle of violence and abuse, of pain and trauma, of lies and deceit.

As this article will illustrate, *Genossin Kuckuck* – the working title was "Ein deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald" – is the result of a complex and long process of artistic transformation: Between 2009 and 2023 Feuchtenberger wrote and drew dozens of separate story arcs for the storyworld of this project, creating eventually the largest graphic novel in her oeuvre.<sup>8</sup> By the time *Genossin Kuckuck* was published in 2023, more than fifteen years had passed since Feuchtenberger's last graphic novel, the final installment of *Die Hure h* from 2007. As such, then, in size as well as in artistic ambition, *Genossin Kuckuck* was nothing short of an artistic rebirth.

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<sup>7</sup> See the concept the New Socialist or Soviet Man (Mensch) as described, for instance, in Herschel and Edith Alt, *The New Soviet Man. His Upbringing and Character Development*.

<sup>8</sup> Some themes and motifs can be traced back even further to her album *wehwehweh.supertraene.de* and to various stories included in the collection *Die Spaziergängerin*.

The final version of the title of the book, “Genossin Kuckuck,” came to her late in the process in 2023, as she told Katrin Gottschalk of *die tageszeitung*, inspired by the intertext “Cuckoo Madame,” a song by Robert Wyatt (Gottschalk). Wyatt’s song personifies the cuckoo, a bird which lays its eggs in another’s nest to have their chicks raised by the other bird. The mystery of such a *Kuckuckskind* lies at the center of Feuchtenberger’s book.

To understand Feuchtenberger’s aesthetic and narrative project in this work, we will uncover the palimpsest-like intertextual structure of *Genossin Kuckuck* as the fundamental principle of the complex and protracted composition of the graphic novel. The various story arcs and episodes are connected by themes and leitmotifs which are simultaneously aligned with and parodying the composition technique of the great modernist novel. For our analysis of the intricacies of the storyworld presented, it will be helpful to focus on central leitmotifs such as the slugs, the “grano blu,” the ducks, the dress that is never finished, the lost photos and the empty paintings.

The palimpsest structure and the leitmotifs are evidence of the role transformation plays in shaping the whole project. *Genossin Kuckuck* is not only the result of a process of artistic transformation, but transformation is also a central principle of the storyworld of “Ein deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald.” Drawing on memories as an ever fluid, transient material, the graphic novel’s storyworld is in constant flux, i.e., in a constant process of passing and becoming that affects all aspects of this world – from historical events to characters and their bodies and the natural world surrounding them. The book feels less like a finished product and more like a series of snapshots of a project in flux. Feuchtenberger breaks down the barriers between different states of awareness, different modes of perception, and different states of being. The surreal that is a hallmark of many avant-garde movements and was a dominant feature in Feuchtenberger’s earlier works such as *Somnambule* (1998) or *Die Hure h* (1996–2007), is here employed in a more constrained manner: Several episodes from the biographical and historical story arcs are mirrored in dreamlike, surreal scenes. Feuchtenberger creates a densely woven net of leitmotifs that provides readers with clues on how to navigate the fragmented memories and connects the ‘realist’ and ‘surrealist’ story arcs. Feuchtenberger’s comics call into question images which we would otherwise readily accept as representations of ‘reality.’ In a self-reflexive mode, her images examine their own mode of production and the way they create (hi)story as they point to the medium’s conditions and potentialities (Engelmann 11). The constant flux of the storyworld is also underscored by the non-linear storyline. In arranging the various layers of the story, Feuchtenberger does not let herself be restrained by a chronological timeline of events but follows patterns of association which might trigger memories. The discontinuity is paired with repetition.

Repetition is of course not specific to Feuchtenberger's comic art but a typical feature of the medium.<sup>9</sup> Feuchtenberger repeats scenes by separating cause and effect of an event in the story, or by showing us the same event from different perspectives. For instance, various stories within the storyworld of "Ein deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald" deal with pain and suffering passed on from generation to generation through the memory of transgenerational trauma. Yet resilience comes from the transformative forces of nature, and life's eternal cyclicity always returns balance to the world.<sup>10</sup> Before readers even enter the storyworld, Feuchtenberger establishes that she does not believe – in spite of her engagement with history and especially with historical violence against women – that she ought to tell history 'the way it really was'; she revokes the promise of closure that is so essential to sequential graphic narratives (Frahm 32), refusing to point to a message or identifiable meaning, instead stressing her subjective viewpoint and her perspective as a feminist.

Turning our attention to Feuchtenberger's creation of *Genossin Kuckuck*, it is important to note that she worked as usual without drafts or a storyboard. Citing Heinrich von Kleist's idea of the "allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden" ("on the gradual production of thoughts while speaking") as one of her guiding principles, she experiments with various styles, various drawing materials and various forms of storytelling. As a result, story arcs and episodes within the project vary significantly in technique, style, and mode. Most notable is the constant alternation between the more fluid narrative style of episodes drawn in ink and the more static, still life-like charcoal images that are darkly evocative and brimming with an enclosed energy that give the final book its rhythm. By both stressing the fragmentary nature of memory and rejecting the conventions of the traditional novel, Feuchtenberger embraces a parodistic approach to the form and reveals rather than hides the bricolage character of the book.<sup>11</sup> She uses an unreliable narrator and creates a polyphonic narrative (Allen 14) that gives voice to many diverse characters. The different voices are hence never fully har-

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9 As Jens Balzer has noted, a comic is built on repetition and variation. As a comic repeats a panel over and over while varying it, even the smallest graphic changes imply semantic changes (Balzer 176). Balzer and Martin tom Dieck have shown this in their graphic novel *Salut, Deleuze!* where the crossing of the river Styx plays out over and over again in variation.

10 Feuchtenberger has created narratives of those cycles of eternal transformation in other works, such as her adaptation of the story of the "Skeleton Woman" and the sexual violence against women she encoded into the majestic serenity of the Münster altar (Skelettfrau; Nijdam and Stuhlmann; Stuhlmann).

11 It would be interesting to compare *Genossin Kuckuck* with Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (2007) and explore the obvious similarities in style, approach, and topic.

monious, and sometimes even offer competing truth claims. Across the story-world, Feuchtenberger employs female focalization (Kupczyńska). As in her other works, most characters in this case are female, including the narrator, Kerstin, Effi, Rosi, the grandmother, the *Königin* Vontjanze and the dog, the Anatiden and the "Große Frau." The male characters include the Russian soldiers, Effe Erre/Jochen, and the father, "Waidgenosse" Metell. The latter all attempt to dominate the world through violence, while the women are more attuned to nature and its hidden powers. Yet in a world dominated by patriarchal power structures, women are inevitably both victims, accomplices, and sometimes even perpetrators of (physical and emotional) violence.

With regard to the sequencing of panels in a comic, Frahm reminds us, that it is the act of reading that places them into a "chrono-logical" order and not the appearance on the page where all panels are simultaneously present. Each new panel gives us a new image, its contents a new recombination of text and graphic elements which mimic and alter the previous image. Hence, following Linda Hutcheon, Frahm does not see the relation between panels as one of mimesis, but of parody (Frahm 37; Hutcheon 101). Hutcheon understands parody as performing a dual role within postmodern avant-garde literature: It informs a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining stance and is also present in a set of narrative features such as ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality (Hutcheon 1, 93 et passim). The same is true for Feuchtenberger's portrayal of her central characters. She constantly alters their appearance with every new variation of telling the story. With this fragmented, or "de-constructed" identity of her characters (Beckmann et al. 177), she rejects not only the notion of a single, unified personal identity but also the idea of an "essence" behind the visual and textual signifiers. The body that in a comic is always a parody, always fragmented, always present in multiple variations on the same page and never a stabile entity (Klar 224), is pushed to the extremes of a constant transformation in *Genossin Kuckuck*.

In the final analysis, Feuchtenberger calls into question the categories of "human" and "nonhuman," while examining the practices through which these boundaries are stabilized and destabilized (Barad 808; Rauchenbacher). To her, all creatures are equal. She subverts our accepted hierarchy of the natural world and removes humans from our presumed position of domination.<sup>12</sup> For instance, she draws humans with bear or raven heads and includes talking ducks and royal slugs. With the storyworld of *Genossin Kuckuck* in constant flux and metamorphosis, she is fascinated by states of being "in-between," by mushrooms that

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12 With Barad, Marina Rauchenbacher calls Feuchtenberger's approach "posthumanist." Cf. Rauchenbacher 14.

are neither animal nor plant, or by plasma that is neither solid, liquid, nor gas. A central image of the whole project that Feuchtenberger introduces early on is the slug. In the exposition, as Kerstin and Effi seal their pact for life, Effi calls Kerstin “die schönste Schneckenprinzessin” (*Genossin Kuckuck* 9, Fig. 1). “Schnecke,” “Schneck,” or “Schneckchen” are commonly used as terms of endearment in German (Grimm col. 1213). However, when Effi spends time with the boys at the bus stop, Kerstin becomes jealous and finds her “schleimig” (*Genossin Kuckuck* 97). Slugs are a hermaphrodite or intersexual species and some change their sex a few times during their life cycle and can be read as a sexually charged metaphor. As a slug invasion infests Pritschitanow, slugs representing oppressed or unregulated sexual desires appear all over the book.

### III

As the remainder of this article will illustrate, the graphic novel *Genossin Kuckuck* exhibits its genesis as an assemblage, a vast intertextual network of visual, linguistic, textual, and cultural precursor texts and references, resembling a truly polyphonic intertextual cosmos (Allen 22, 29–30). Put differently, with its layers of memory and layers of the memories of its production, it can be read as a palimpsest.

As a metaphor for a text with various multilayered and previously produced texts, a palimpsest is employed as a narratological tool as well as in different models of intertextuality (Dillon 11; Allen 98–100). Palimpsests, understood both literally and metaphorically, give us access to different historical layers of a text and hence can concurrently contain multiple meanings. Exploring the palimpsest structure of Feuchtenberger’s *Genossin Kuckuck*, we can begin at the material level. In an interview with Giordana Piccinini, Alessio Trabacchini, and Emilio Varrà, Feuchtenberger described her process working with charcoal:

Das Zeichnen mit Kohle zum Beispiel ist sehr sinnlich. Es ist wie Staub. Es erzeugt sofort einen Raum, Licht. Ich kann korrigieren, bis die Zeichnung erscheint, die schon vorher auf dem Papier war, zumindest scheint mir das so. Da ich viel korrigiere, waren unter manchen Zeichnungen schon andere, und das gefällt mir, sogar die Haut hat eine Transparenz, mit vielen Schichten. Du siehst nicht, was darunter ist, aber du fühlst etwas Komplexes. (Piccinini, Trabacchini, and Varrà 75)

Since Feuchtenberger never works with drafts, each individual drawing already resembles a palimpsest, as it contains the traces of previous versions. Furthermore, the fragmented, bricolage structure of the narrative indicates the palimpsest-like structure of the book as a whole. To explore its composition, I will look





**Fig. 1:** Anke Feuchtenberger, *Genossin Kuckuck*, p. 9.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I am immensely grateful to Alexandra Rügler and Dirk Rehm at Reprodukt, Berlin, for their generous help with the illustrations.

at several episodes from the storyworld of “Ein Deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald” that Feuchtenberger extracted from the project for other publications between 2011 and 2014 and later re-integrated into the final book *Genossin Kuckuck*, namely (1) *grano blue*, a folio comic album from 2011 that contains four scenes, (2) the short story “Effi redet Blech” published in *Orang* in 2013, (3) “Die Königin Vontjanze,” a small pamphlet to accompany an exhibition, and (4) a cycle of drawings Feuchtenberger contributed to a new edition of Kleist’s *Marquise von O . . .*, also published in 2014. A review of these four intertexts will show how Feuchtenberger constructed the final book, *Genossin Kuckuck*, out of existing material and how she employs themes and leitmotifs, carefully crafting and structuring her storyworld.

(1) One previously published work that stems from the story world of “Ein deutsches Tier” and is later integrated in *Genossin Kuckuck* is the thirty-two-page folio-size album *grano blu* published by Canicola in Bologna in 2011. The album features four different scenes from the storyworld of “Ein deutsches Tier im deutschen Wald,” all of them linked to the mysterious “grano blu,” blue beads that themselves are connected to the supernatural, spiritual or surreal narrative level of the project.

The first scene, drawn in simple ink, focuses on the relationship between Kerstin and her brother Effe Erre, later renamed Jochen. Effe Erre is drawn as a tall, athletic man with a hairy body and a completely bald head. The caption to his vignette at the frontispiece reads “Der große alte Effe Erre, schön wie eine geschälte Lärche, lebt nun enthaltsam. Er ist stark, bewältigt das allein” (*grano blu* 1). It is unclear whether “enthaltsam” here means “celibate” or “temperate” and whether it refers to his previous sexual promiscuity or his drug consumption. The episode juxtaposes Effe Erre’s hard physical work on a farm with Kerstin’s mysterious transformation when she multiplies as she steps into the village pond.

The second episode from *grano blu*, seven splash pages in charcoal with small text boxes above and below the drawings, begins with three images. We see an empty hallway, a telephone on a wall, and a line of telephone poles along a country road with wind turbines in the background, locating the episode in the present. The next four panels feature a group of three young women in identical outfits, part dress, part uniform, and part habit (Fig. 2). From the text, we learn that an emergency call has summoned them from ‘the home’ to rescue the survivors of the village’s summer party by the river. Dried up and bloated, people have turned into grey, sluggish, amorphous blobs after the consumption of the mysterious substance “grano blu.”



FÜR ZWEI VON UNS WAR ES DAS ERSTE MAL. DIE DÄTESTE ALLERDINGS WUSSTE, WAS ZU TUN WAR.

**Fig. 2:** Anke Feuchtenberger, *Genossin Kuckuck*, p. 88.

The third and last section of *grano blu* consists of twenty-three pages with four panels per spread, in a similar, but more elaborate and intricate ink than the first. The story alternates between two episodes: (a) A letter Effi wrote to Kerstin from a mysterious home for girls, and (b) Effe Erre's war on slugs in his yard. In her letter, Effi tells Kerstin about her reluctant adaptation to life at 'the home.' Shifting the focalization, the letter is written from the perspective of a somewhat precocious girl who does not fully understand where she is, why she is being punished, and what is happening with her. The girls, including Effi, are depicted here as little children, a portrayal that is at odds with earlier depictions of Effi as a teenager, and with her covertly sexually-charged activities. Even though Feuch-

tenberger changes Effi's body into that of a child, there is no return for her to a state of innocence given what has been done to her through violence, drugs and indoctrination. Effi tells Kerstin about the preparations for the grand annual ceremony to be held down by the river. The girls practice "innere Einkehr" (*grano blu* 21) by lying on their backs with their legs pushed upwards and spread and also engage in "Plasma singen" (*grano blu* 23), an intimate physical dialogue in which the two girls spew a bubbly substance.<sup>14</sup> When on good behavior, the girls are allowed to play in the garden where they devour the lavishly growing butterbur and sometimes find "Körnchen (. . .) von einem wunderbaren Blau" (*grano blu* 22). Whatever the mysterious mission of the 'home' may be, it appears that the girls' chubby children's bodies are slowly transforming into slugs.

In the alternating fourth scene, as an invasion of slugs plagues the village's gardeners, Effe Erre, otherwise reformed and sober, resorts to drastic measures. Since burning them does not defeat the slugs, a neighbor recommends blue fertilizer, but to Effe Erre's disgust, the slugs killed by the chemical are just greedily eaten up by their sisters who just keep on multiplying. Changing into a beautifully crocheted dress made by the "Irish students" at the "convent" for Kerstin (*grano blu* 28), Effe Erre eventually shows off his feminine side and turns to use ducks as a natural defense against the slugs.

When Feuchtenberger adapted *grano blu* for *Genossin Kuckuck*, she turned the four scenes recounted above into five chapters of the novel. In chapter two, after being bullied by Effi, Kerstin runs into the woods and dives into the pond, summoning the mythological "Große Frau" with her cuckoo-call (*Genossin Kuckuck* 22). In chapter seven, Jochen tosses his sister into the pond while she attempts to release slug eggs because she had tried to strong-arm him into taking the blame for a teapot which she accidentally broke. But instead of crying for help, Kerstin just quietly and majestically floats away (*Genossin Kuckuck* 76).

Chapter 9 of *Genossin Kuckuck* features the seven charcoal splash pages mentioned above and we now recognize the hallway and the phone from the home that Rosi built after German reunification. The chapter also now identifies the three uniformed women as "Anatiden" – anatidae being the biological family of ducks who take care of the poisoned, sluggish villagers. Chapter 11 includes Effe Erre's war on the slugs and is entitled "Arioniden" (meaning "Slugs"). In Chapter 12, "Das Kleid," Feuchtenberger made one change of note: The dress which in *grano blue* was crocheted by Irish students is now the one Kerstin's grandmother had worked on but never finished while waiting for Kerstin's return (*Genossin*

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<sup>14</sup> The texture of plasma also refers to Kerstin's observation of Effi becoming "schleimig" whenever she spends time with the boys.

*Kuckuck* 112–113). The dress, just as in Homer's *Odyssey*, becomes a powerful, multilayered metaphor not just for Effe Erre/Jochen's transformation, but for the fabric of a kinship that has complicated patterns of belonging and appropriation, of care, kindness, hope and faith woven into it.

(2) As mentioned above, another earlier work that Feuchtenberger integrated into *Genossin Kuckuck* is a twenty-page story entitled "Effi redet Blech," which appeared in the comic magazine *Orang* in January 2013. Here, Feuchtenberger tells the story of Kerstin and Effi's eventual falling out. Effi Mettel is "schon entwickelt" ("Blech" 44) and the physical changes of their bodies, both equally desired and feared, open up a rift between the girls. Effi, who hates to be groped by her father's Russian hunting friends, now prefers to spend time with the boys at the bus stop, especially with Kerstin's brother Effe Erre.<sup>15</sup> Since Kerstin does not understand what Effi both is trying to and avoiding to tell her, Kerstin perceives Effi as talking nonsense, "[s]ie redet Blech," as the expression goes. Metal appears in the story not only in the wordplay that makes up Effi's name. A brass keychain made in socialist Poland for export to both East and West lands first in Effe Erre's hands and is passed on to Effi, eventually becoming a key piece of evidence for Effi's sexual abuse, just like the brass of the medals on the chests of the Russian visitors and the trinkets they bring as presents. Even though the story is told retrospectively, the narrative focalization is once again close to Kerstin's naive perspective as a child. As a result, readers must piece together the story just as she does. Soon afterwards, Effi becomes "träge und abwesend" ("Blech" 57), which alerts Kerstin's grandmother, a stalwart comrade and champion of German-Russian friendship, to prompt Effi to confide in her. Soon after the confidential talk, Effi disappears. The entire story "Effi redet Blech" was included in *Genossin Kuckuck* with only minor adjustments as its fifteenth chapter. The episode shows Feuchtenberger on the one hand as a master comic short storyteller, but it is also a key sequence of the graphic novel as it unlocks the secrets surrounding the end of Kerstin's and Effi's friendship and alludes to why and how Effi was sent away.

(3) A third previously published work included in *Genossin Kuckuck* is the short story *Die Königin Vontjanze* from 2014<sup>16</sup> which features 18 large charcoal drawings in a hyperrealist style similar to the charcoal series in *grano blu*. The images

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15 The theme of sexual abuse runs through the whole book; women (and also men) of different generations are subjected to such abuse, but Feuchtenberger never addresses it explicitly.

16 This was Feuchtenberger's contribution to the 2014 exhibition "MUMMY" that opened the Hamburg Comic Festival. Feuchtenberger and Stefano Ricci had invited five other comic artists, Anton Engel, Jul Gordon, Magdalena Kaszuba, Gosia Machon, and Birgit Weyhe, to contribute to a show that explored the possibilities of narrative, figurative, and poetic drawing. The works

appear to include autobiographical aspects as we seem to recognize tokens of Feuchtenberger's personal life in the countryside in Western Pomerania: an old country house, a dog, and the portrait of a small child. These images are contrasted with scenes of wildlife, more precisely of spiders and slugs – and it is one particularly noble slug, the regal “Königin Vontjanze,” that becomes the main protagonist. We follow her slow, somewhat laborious journey from the butterbur plantation by the river across the sun-soaked stone slabs of the village's old parade square. “Sie wiegt anmutig grüßend ihr Köpfchen hin und her” (*Vontjanze* 4), as if the slug were taking a royal salute. Her body glistens majestically, especially when she slides over the “verkohlten Klümpchen (. . .) der letzten Verbrennung” (*Vontjanze* 3, see Fig. 3). As the focus of the narrator zooms in on the slug, we enter a world of strange beauty. Feuchtenberger fills the whole page with the animal's round, soft, and otherworldly body; it appears gigantic and simultaneously repulsive and gorgeous (see Fig. 3). Eight pages later, we see the broken body of a dead slug. The text box above it reads: “Effe Erre, angesichts der Schönheit [of the royal slug, A.S.], bittet um Vergebung für das gestrige Massaker” (*Vontjanze* 11). Only readers of *grano blu* will be able to decode the reference to Effe Erre's failed attempt of massacring the slugs by using fire and poison. But here, Effe Erre never enters the picture. Instead, the dog, as the human's companion and part of both the human and the natural world, stands in for him and seems to mimic Effe Erre's suspicious gaze as it intently watches the royal slug (*Vontjanze* 12).<sup>17</sup> Then, as if to fulfill an unspoken command from its master, the dog suddenly lunges forward and, with one quick bite, kills the innocent, helpless beauty (*Vontjanze* 16), before it spits it out (17). The short story “Königin Vontjanze” also functions as an introduction to the story arc of surreal episodes in the novel in which we enter the world of slugs, mushrooms and constant metamorphosis that mirrors and complements the main protagonists.

(4) We now turn to a series of drawings Feuchtenberger created in 2013 for a new illustrated edition of three of Heinrich von Kleist's most prominent novellas, including *Die Marquise von O . . .*, for which she was commissioned by Büchergilde Gutenberg. The intent was to contrast the familiar stories with contemporary, distinctly different visual representations. Feuchtenberger includes these drawings about Kleist's novella in the coda (“Nachtrag”) of *Genossin Kuckuck* which is the section of the book in which the themes of violence, history, patriarchy, and

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were documented in seven small brochures published by Ricci's and Feuchtenberger's MamiVerlag, among them “Die Königin Vontjanze.”

<sup>17</sup> Lena Winkel has written an insightful piece on the central role dogs play in Feuchtenberger's work. Cf. Winkel.



**Fig. 3:** Anke Feuchtenberger, *Genossin Kuckuck*, pp. 226–227.

transgenerational trauma are most poignant. Kleist had been a long-time but always problematic artistic dialogue partner for Feuchtenberger, notwithstanding the fact that she had also wrestled with the multiple ways in which (patriarchal) power and (male) violence shape and damage bodies, minds, and souls through discursive practices in his works. “Seit Jahren,” Feuchtenberger states in her introduction,<sup>18</sup> “tauchen in meinen Bildern Links zu Kleist auf” (“Anmerkungen” 1). Feuchtenberger chose to include ten large scale charcoal drawings which very clearly tell their own story within a ‘silent’ graphic narrative, a comic without words (Lamothé) interspersed into Kleist’s novella. Neither the time period in which Feuchtenberger sets her story nor her cast of characters reference Kleist’s novella. Some images are realistically drawn, and they seem to depict a German village in the mid-1940s. We see a woman with paperwork at a table, men in a rubble-filled street with their hands raised above their heads, two grieving women covering their mouths, and two infants in a crib. The surreal here is present in images of a Russian soldier riding down a flight of stairs as a winged demon on a four-legged cock; or in an image of a couple in front of a collapsed building who are joined by an injured man wrapped in bandages from head to toe like a mummy.

<sup>18</sup> Feuchtenberger, „Anmerkungen zur Arbeit an der *Marquise von O . . .*“ (2014). Hereafter referred to as “Anmerkungen.”

While Feuchtenberger sympathizes with Kleist as the victim of a brutal Prussian military education<sup>19</sup> she also cites the callous distich he published in *Phöbus* in April 1808 that shows Kleist was aware that he used sexual violence as a bait for readers' attention.<sup>20</sup> Feuchtenberger questions Kleist's empathy with the victim here, not despite, but because of his own traumatic experience as a child: While Kleist might have been "ohnmächtig," or powerless, at the hands of his training officers, he mocks the "Ohnmacht," the shocked fainting, of a female reader faced with the violence he portrays. Feuchtenberger hence decides to contrast the text of Kleist's novella with images of stories revolving around the post-war situation in East Germany in 1945, in particular the violence during and after Nazi Germany's liberation committed by the Russian army. Drawing on accounts by her mother and grandmother, she "verlegte (. . .) das Geschehen der *Marquise von O . . . in diese Zeit*" ("Anmerkungen" 1). Using the verb "verlegen," which in German can also mean "to misplace," Feuchtenberger never situates her story exclusively in one particular time and place but rather takes the liberty to leap "in großen Sprüngen" ("Anmerkungen" 2) back and forth between different times and places. Both in Kleist's novella and in her own family's stories she detected suppressed, unarticulated feelings, "Gefühle des Zorns über die Ungerechtigkeit" and the desire for "heimliche Rache" ("Anmerkungen" 2) locked away with these memories. Feuchtenberger worries what this trauma might have meant for the children born into this brutality: "Ich glaube, beim Lesen der Erzählung und beim Zeichnen permanent das wütende Schweigen der Frauen aus der Generation meiner Großmutter zu hören. Das glückliche Ende ist nur eine papierne Oberfläche über dem unterirdischen Brodeln. Wie immer bei Kleist" ("Anmerkungen" 2).<sup>21</sup>

When she eventually included her "illustrations" of Kleist's novella in *Genossin Kuckuck*, the images appear in sequence and become hence readable as a graphic story. Placing this story of violence against women in the post-WWII period at the end of the book, as a "Nachtrag," Feuchtenberger adds a special emphasis to it, as if handing her readers a key to a deeper understanding of the en-

19 This can be seen in the following quote: "Spätestens als 14-Jähriger muss Kleist erzieherische Gewalt durch die preußische Kadettenanstalt ohnmächtig erlebt haben" ("Anmerkungen" 1).

20 "Dieser Roman ist nicht für dich, meine Tochter. In Ohnmacht! Schamlose Posse! Sie hielt, weiß ich, die Augen bloß zu" (Kleist 62).

21 Feuchtenberger's illustrations of Kleist's novella also echo a very different work of art of hers, namely an altar, which she created for the *Museum des Landschaftsverbandes Westfalen-Lippe* in Münster in 2018. The museum had invited her to design and build a response to one of its most famous pieces, the massive winged altar by the so-called Schöppinger Master (around 1470). Accepting the commission, Feuchtenberger was adamant to shift the focus of her piece to a female sensibility and perspective, placing the plight of women, especially sexual violence and rape during wartime, at the center of her work.



tire graphic novel. The introductory text to the “Nachtrag” suggests that the images that follow are to be read as a collection of artwork, “selbst gemalt” (*Genossin Kuckuck* 433) by Rosi, the mother, who hung them in the hallway of the retirement home she built. As readers, we have already ‘seen’ them before, when in Chapter 4 Frank Sternemann and Torsten Greiff are visiting the home.<sup>22</sup> Yet, when Torsten pauses in the hallway to study them, the frames on the wall are blank (*Genossin Kuckuck* 41). This picture gallery thereby echoes another lost archive in the book, namely a photo album that Kerstin’s grandmother kept for her and that Torsten and Frank steal and eventually destroy when they visit the retirement home looking for clues as to why they were institutionalized as teenagers. Here, in the coda, Rosi gives Kerstin a tour of her art, and the texts Feuchtenberger adds in the gutters between the panels provide Rosi’s commentary. Thus, the images become a gallery of Rosi’s memories and help both Kerstin and the readers understand Rosi better as a traumatized and conflicted character. She claims that the first image of the woman at work at the table which readers of Kleist’s novella might have interpreted as a depiction of the *Marquise von O . . .*, is rather a self-portrait of her, Rosi, as a young woman. In the third panel with the image of the cock-rider, Rosi comments: “Wir Frauen hatten uns alle im Keller versteckt. Danach durften wir 40 Jahre nicht darüber reden. Die Russen waren ja unsere Befreier” (*Genossin Kuckuck* 434). This is a literal echo of an earlier panel that had originally appeared in the story “Effi redet Blech”: We see two women facing each other as one paints a smear of coal dust on the other’s face to make her less attractive to Russian soldiers looking to rape girls and women.<sup>23</sup> The text above and below the panel reads (in Kerstin’s voice): “Zu der Geschichte von den Mädchen, denen die Röcke über dem Kopf zusammengebunden waren, gehören auch mit Ruß beschmierte Gesichter und schwarz gefärbte Zähne. / Die Großmutter sagt, dass es sie selbst nicht erwischt hat. Und überhaupt seien die Russen doch unsere Freunde” (*Genossin Kuckuck* 143). Like Kleist’s text, both Feuchtenberger’s words and her images are elliptical. The few sentences, just like the image, leave out the actual traumatic event of the rape.

Both in Kleist’s as well as in Feuchtenberger’s story, Russian soldiers are the perpetrators, and the rape they committed is neither addressed nor brought to jus-

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<sup>22</sup> The two men’s last names are an explicit reference to Kleist’s life. The two physicians *Kreisphysikus* Dr. Sternemann and *Chirurgus forensis* Greif performed the autopsies of Heinrich von Kleist and Henriette Vogel in December 1811 (Cf. Minde-Pouet 51–53).

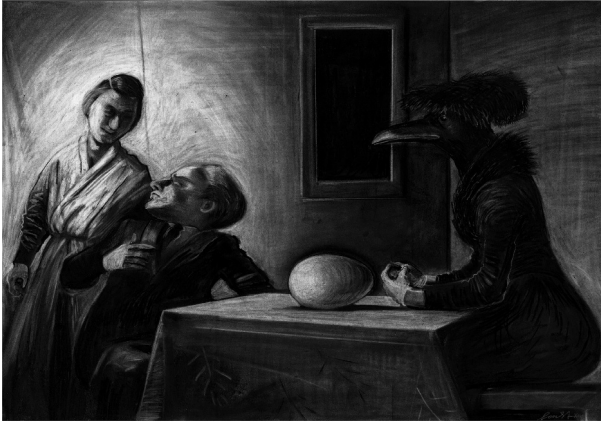
<sup>23</sup> The image from “Effi redet Blech” in turn echoes a similar one in an earlier short story by Feuchtenberger entitled “Alte Rose,” reprinted in *Die Spaziergängerin* on page 21 – which shows many similarities to scenes from *Genossin Kuckuck* and might also provide a clue to how Rosie received her name.



Fig. 4a: Anke Feuchtenberger, Heinrich von Kleist, *Die Marquise von O . . .*, p. 186.

tice (Dutoit). Rosi's words here echo Feuchtenberger's reference to the "wütendes Schweigen" of her own grandmother's generation. The caption to the panel showing the two women silently covering their mouths in pain reads accordingly: "Wir hatten es ja selbst erlebt, oder mit angesehen" (*Genossin Kuckuck* 435).

Allowing the coda to establish its own rhythm, Feuchtenberger changes the sequence and the size of the images from those in her Kleist story. One major change occurs midway through the sequence when she replaces one image with another. The sixth image of her Kleist story shows three characters at a table. On the left side, the image shows an older man in a three-piece suit, turning his head to the left and looking up to a younger woman. Opposite them we see an older woman with braided hair, but without a body, her hands floating above the table with a torn string of pearls in front of her (see Fig. 4a). In *Genossin Kuckuck*, however, the woman in the scene on the right has a full human body but the head of a raven, wears a black dress, and has a large egg in front of her (see Fig. 4b). The latter image evokes the concept of the proverbial *Rabenmutter*, a term used in German to describe a supposedly callous, cruel, or 'unnatural' mother. In an interview, Feuchtenberger pointed to her own more lenient view of a "Rabenmutter" as opposed to a "Kuckucksmutter" who, at least in the world of birds, acts far more cruelly by refusing to raise her chicks herself (Gottschalk). In the caption to this panel, Rosi states that she did not want any children. Yet when the newly founded German Democratic Republic urged woman to help secure the future of Socialism, she relented and had a child. As a possible witness, if not a victim herself of rape and violence committed by Russian soldiers, Rosi passes down her trauma to her



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**Fig. 4b:** Anke Feuchtenberger, *Genossin Kuckuck*, p. 436.

daughter Effi who herself becomes a victim of sexual assault. Just like in Kleist's story, Rosi has Effi sent away to a "home" to avoid shaming the family. In *Genossin Kuckuck*, Feuchtenberger deletes the last two images of her Kleist story, so that the final image of the "Nachtrag" is the one of the two infants in the crib. The caption reads: "In der Wochenkrippe haben sie dich und Effi immer zusammen spielen lassen. Ihr wart viel draussen" (*Genossin Kuckuck* 438). Here, too, the happy ending is just "papierne Oberfläche über dem unterirdischen Brodeln" ("Anmerkungen" 2), as Feuchtenberger stated in her above comment on Kleist.

## IV

To conclude, uncovering the palimpsest-like structure of *Genossin Kuckuck* allows us to understand the complex and protracted composition of the book. The various story arcs and episodes connected by themes and leitmotifs are both aligned with and parodying the compositional technique of the great modernist novel. As this article has shown, the project of *Genossin Kuckuck* is both rooted in and connected with a complex network of previous texts in Feuchtenberger's oeuvre. Not only does the book transcend the vast majority of contemporary German graphic novels in scope and ambition, it also occupies a singular place within the German contemporary literary landscape and proves that the feminist avant-garde of the 1990s continues to energize the genre of the comic.

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