Introduction

> It goes without saying that ethics cannot be put into words.…(Ethics and aesthetics are one.)
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Writing and Complicity

A monograph that encompasses such different genres as political theory (Arendt), fiction (Kafka), cultural criticism (Benjamin), film (*Germany in Autumn*), and drama (Müller) raises questions: Why *these* thinkers, writers, and filmmakers? What could a configuration of Arendt, Kafka, Benjamin, German film, and Heiner Müller possibly show that cannot be shown within the confines of existing disciplines? What is the advantage of aligning political theory, fiction, cultural criticism, film, and drama? How can one account for the peculiar constellation of different genres and media, different modes of presentation? To answer these questions, it might serve us well to digress for a moment and start by simply asking what it is that is actually discussed. What are the issues that link these (theoretical, literary, cinematic) works to one another?

Thematically, the following chapters seek to relate these works through certain political, juridical, and, above all, ethical questions. Yet oddly enough, if we

continue to ask what connects the readings performed in this book, an ever-recurring peculiar paradox strikes the reader's eye: each of the literary, theoretical, and cinematic works under discussion seems to be dealing with some sort of ethical concern that, even as it is posited, appears to be revoked or canceled out rhetorically. For instance, Arendt, in her monumental historiography *Origins of Totalitarianism,* clearly condemns the particular logic of totalitarian domination while retaining its dubious use of metaphorical language and its ominous ways of relating to facts in her own writing. Similarly, Benjamin, in "Toward a Critique of Violence," criticizes the coercive nature of law even while enacting its duplicity in the context of his own text. The filmmakers of *Germany in Autumn* decidedly denounce the escalating violence and the concomitant dehumanizing rhetoric between the German state and the terrorist Baader-Meinhof group even as their own ethical stand regarding the struggle between state and terrorists remains disconcertingly vague. Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" revolves around the description of a morally appalling torture and execution apparatus—an impression shared by the traveler, who articulates his resolute opposition to the machine and with whom we might feel inclined to identify; however, the indifferent, detached tone suffusing the story, in addition to the traveler's ultimate disavowal of any personal responsibility, suggests some sort of collusion with the regime. And, finally, in his drama *Germania Death in Berlin* Heiner Müller outlines the convoluted German history of violence, which indubitably is meant to evoke our condemnation; but at the same time Müller also appears amenable to some sort of complicity with the described violence and, in fact, explicitly calls for such complicity in his autobiography: "You must be complicit with the violence, with the atrocity, so that you can describe it."[1] "Art holds and requires a bloody root. Complicity with the horror, with the terror, is part of the description."[2]

Of Matter and Manner

Does this mean that these works are simply unethical? Or may it be that they still generate something of an ethical momentum, though perhaps of a different kind? What if the question of ethics—in less conceivable ways—emanates from particular modes of presentation and poetic configuration? What if it is intimately tied to the singularity of each work and the specificity of each genre? What if what the constellation of Arendt, Kafka, Benjamin, New German Cinema, and Müller testifies to is precisely an understanding according to which these texts, while concerned with certain ethical questions, cannot be treated as immaterial channels of

1. Heiner Müller and Alexander Kluge, *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten: Gespräche / Alexander Kluge–Heiner Müller* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995), 60.

2. Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen: Eine Autobiographie,* in *Werke,* vol. 9 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 227.

communication due to fundamental structural idiosyncrasies? Could it be that a "medium," rather than being a vehicle for ethical theorems, generates a certain ethical force of its own by the mere means of its mediality or its aesthetic efficacy?[3] Could it be that the question of structural difference emerges not simply as a question of manner but as one of semantic and concretely ethical relevance, that these texts' styles are fundamentally constitutive to the question of ethics, albeit in a covert way? Why might it matter how works of political theory, cultural criticism, literature, and film render their subject matter manifest, and what could be implied by taking their materiality into account?

Inconceivable Effects

If, for example, one were to describe Hannah Arendt's work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in terms of materiality or, more concretely, genre,[4] one would likely classify it as a form of historiographical writing. Yet *Origins* (which I first read in conjunction with the recently published *Denktagebuch [Thought Journal*] [2002] and later put into dialogue with such essays as "Truth and Politics" and "Lying in Politics") is distinctly different from most historiography and likely to strike readers for its particular style. Arendt herself, in fact, speaks of her "rather unusual approach . . . to the whole field of . . . historical sciences" and elaborates on the methodological dilemma of having to reconstruct something—totalitarianism—which, rather than conserving, she felt engaged to destroy.[5] "The problem originally confronting me," Arendt writes, "was simple and baffling at the same time: all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification."[6] Such vindicatory impulse, she suggests, is inherent in any putatively "objective" chronology and can hardly be overcome by dint of "the interference of value-judgments," which makes the historiographical account appear sentimental, moralistic, or biased. Yet does the absence of value judgments make her historiographical account of totalitarian domination complicit or unethical? Arendt's response to the quandary of having to reconstruct something that she felt engaged to destroy is distinctly different from the dominant positivistic paradigm in the social sciences of her day. Rather than basing her argumentation exclusively on "questionnaires, interviews, statistics, or

3. "Mediality" is understood here as the force engendered by a "medium." While my use of the term "medium" will assume a somewhat idiosyncratic meaning in what is to follow, the *OED*'s definition alludes to a tension not unrelated to the issues taken up by this study: "Classical Latin *medium* middle, centre, midst, intermediate course, intermediary, in post-classical Latin also means . . . instrument, or channel; . . . esp. a means or channel of communication or expression."

4. "Genre," according to the *OED,* denotes a "particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose."

5. Hannah Arendt, "A Reply," *Review of Politics* 15 (1953): 76–84, here 79.

6. Ibid., 77.

the scientific evaluation of these data,"[7] Arendt feels that an all-too-heavy reliance on the explanatory power of such quantitative material eventually means the prolonging of the logic of Nazism or, more generally, the "biopolitical" logic of totalitarian politics.[8] At issue, concretely, is the insufficiency of a certain law of genre, namely the historiographical dictum of *sine ira et studio* (of presenting historical materials without indignation or partisanship) in the light of the particular thematic challenge presented by the Holocaust. "To describe the concentration camps *sine ira,*" Arendt notes, "is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself."[9] Since all that happened took place among human beings, and since human beings are by definition ethical beings, who, in contradistinction to animals, assume an understanding of justice,[10] the question of ethics is *intrinsic* rather than one applied to the phenomenon of the camps. There cannot be an apt description of the camps that does not apprehend them as an occurrence in the human world, and as such the phenomenon requires an ethically charged approach rather than settled fervor.

Arendt's response to this methodological and ethical challenge is that of a poetic style, which she frequently described as "storytelling," a form of transfiguration that distinguishes her own historiography from the positivistic approach she disparages. Rather than succumbing to a logic of numbers, a logic that, in talking about the politics of totalitarian extermination, entails a distinct moment of complicity, Arendt's way out of the dilemma lies in the creation of an-*other* language, an-*other* logic—a logic that, by means of its *specific* poetic configuration, establishes a certain incommensurability with and resistance to the dynamics of totalitarian systemization. She generates an edifice of images and imaginings that, in a precariously ambiguous way, contaminate and obliterate totalitarian politics within the context of its presentation. What comes into being is an ethical force never rendered manifest, though incessantly emanating from the poetic infrastructure of her text.

The question of mediality in general and of genre in particular assumes a similarly pivotal role in Walter Benjamin's "Toward a Critique of Violence." Benjamin presents his "Critique" as a philosophical treatise or tractate, a genre that he stages in a most peculiar way. At the center of Benjamin's *explicit discussion* is the

7. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 323 n. 1.

8. The term "biopolitics" is, of course, not to be found in the works of Arendt; it was coined by Michel Foucault and, more recently, developed and popularized by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), esp. 119–88.

9. Arendt, "Reply," 79.

10. "It is the peculiarity of man, in comparison with other animals, that he alone possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and the unjust" (Aristotle, *Politics,* trans. Ernest Barker [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 10f.). Cf. chapters 1, 3, and 6 of this book.

irreconcilability of human law with divine justice,[11] and law's possessive claim to justice, a claim always doomed to fail because of justice's ultimate unintelligibility. At the center of Benjamin's *performance* is an inconspicuous correspondence between, on the one hand, the coercive means-end relationship he talks *about* in the context of his expository remarks on (the means of) law and (the end of) justice, and, on the other hand, the means-end relationship he as speech-actor is caught up with in the context of his argumentation. Eventually, Benjamin will *figuratively* undercut the coercive legal order against which his "Critique" is ostensibly directed; he does not depart from certain premises or positings (*Setzungen*), narrative "means" (followed by certain forms of argumentation), so as to enforce certain narrative "ends" (certain insights into the nature of justice). He does not enact the dynamic he describes as law's positing (*setzende*) means toward the legal enforcement of just ends. Rather, Benjamin—and this is where the peculiar form of his treatise comes into play—produces narrative "means" without (purified from) identifiable narrative "ends." He rhetorically de-poses (*ent-setzt*) his argumentation, thereby undermining the philosophical treatise as the "end-oriented," "purposive literary genre in prose" that it is by definition,[12] all to the effect of free, singular ends, a strangely inconceivable ethical thrust, *beyond* the conventional enforcement of ends—an ethics, in Benjamin's words, "of a different kind."[13]

My discussion of Benjamin's treatise in many ways constitutes the center of this book: what emerges, beyond Benjamin's explicit discussion on the ethics "of a different kind" (beyond his argumentative treatment of the so-called "politics of pure means,"[14] in which means are purified from ends) is a *poetics of pure means*—a poetics in which narrative "means" are purified from narrative "ends," in which narrative means thus do "not function as a means at all, but rather *in some other way.*"[15] This poetics of pure means fundamentally relies on a refusal to operate by means

11. Benjamin speaks of "the stubborn prevailing habit of conceiving . . . just ends as ends of a possible law—that is, not only as generally valid [allgemeingültig] [which follows analytically from the nature of justice] but also as capable of generalizations [verallgemeinerungsfähig], which . . . contradicts the nature of justice. For ends that in one situation are just, universally acceptable [allgemein anzuerkennen] and valid [allgemeingültig] are so in no other situation, no matter how similar the situations may be in other respects" (Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" ["Toward a Critique of Violence"], in *Gesammelte Schriften,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977], 2.1:179–203, here 196). The irreconcilability of law and justice—resulting from law's generalizability and justice's radical singularity—finds an illustration in Anatole France's satirical remark when he notes: "Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under bridges" (after Benjamin, 198). Just because the law treats poor and rich alike doesn't mean it is just. It is ignorant of the fact that the poor, in their specific situation, may have good reasons to sleep under bridges, reasons that the rich simply don't have (and probably wouldn't dream of).

12. "Traktat, m. [lat. Tractatus = Behandlung], literar. Zweckform in Prosa" (Günther Schweikle and Irmgard Schweikle, eds., *Metzler Literaturlexikon: Begriffe und Definitionen* [Stuttgart: Metzler, 1990], 471).

13. Benjamin, "Toward a Critique of Violence," 196.

14. Ibid., 193.

15. Ibid., 196.

of coercion, a refusal to enforce conclusive ends; it is a poetics that subscribes to no-thing other than itself and as such never enforces but perhaps (or that is the question) allows for the ethical momentum that so incessantly seems to surge to the surface in the works under discussion. Yet just how are we to imagine this poetics of pure means in which medium and message no longer relate to each other in the conventional sense of a means-end relationship, but rather "in some other way"? What if we were to think of the relatedness between means and ends as a somehow dissociated relatedness, in which ends were purified of means and means purified of ends, and what if ethics had to do precisely with such purity? What if a text were to generate a force by the pure means of its mediality, an ethical force neither clearly identifiable nor definitely absent but strangely present as an inconceivable effect?

Benjamin, in his "Critique," unremittingly invokes such an-other ethics of a nonenforceable, noncoercive kind, which, provisionally, he also describes as an ethics of "higher orders."[16] He insinuates that this ethics lies *beyond* any established and socially integrated set of morals, *beyond* politico-moral discourses of "victors and vanquished," yet he does so without ever conceptually spelling it out, for that, he says, "would lead too far."[17] What would lead too far is an ethics beyond human recognition and human instrumentalization, one that will never "be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in *incomparable effects*."[18] Such incomparable or, more precisely, *inconceivable* effects are at the enigmatic epicenter of Benjamin's treatise and of this book; their epistemic incommensurability describes the abyss from which each of the theoretical, literary, and cinematic works under discussion seizes its ethical momentum, specifically negotiated each time. It goes without saying that such inconceivable effects of a different ethics are, strictly speaking, not simply of a higher or other order but radically out of order. They defy their deduction from *pre*rogatives and *pre*establishments and are fundamentally nondeducible, nonderivable—that is, fundamentally particular or singular.[19]

16. Ibid., 193.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 203.

19. Benjamin, in a perhaps curious turn, does relate this ethics of the singular—both in "Critique" as well as in a posthumous fragment entitled "Notes on a Project on the Category of Justice"—to the notion of *Verantwortung,* "responsibility." The Middle High German verb *verantwürten* initially denoted "to respond in front of a court, to respond to a question" (*vor Gericht antworten, eine Frage beantworten*); it implied the imperative to respond to a *particular* question raised in the context of a trial, a juridical procedure subordinating itself to the higher order of justice. Only later did *verantworten* assume its contemporary connotation of "to stand up *for* something, to *represent* something" (*für etwas einstehen, etwas vertreten*) and, if used reflexively, "to justify oneself" (*sich rechtfertigen*) (Duden's *Das Herkunftswörterbuch: Etymologie der deutschen Sprache* [Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1992], 777). When Benjamin speaks of *Verantwortung,* "responsibility," he employs the word, I would submit, in its original sense—"response-ability"—in the sense of an ability to respond to a particular moment, a specific situation, and to do justice to this situation by taking its uniqueness into account. For a careful discussion of Benjamin's understanding of responsibility, see Judith Butler, "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World,* ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 201–19.

Benjamin's ethics of the singular, then, is inextricably linked to his particular poetics. In a certain way, the rhetorical intricacy of "Critique" originates in his decision to present his thoughts in the form of a philosophical treatise, a genre typically characterized by its conclusive treatment of a problem. Yet given the epistemic limits he faces—namely the conceptual unattainability of justice—and given, thus, the double bind of the law of genre and the specific economy of his subject, Benjamin attempts to explore the question of justice by the (pure) means of its poetic enactment. He addresses the methodical problem of the nonpresentability of justice via a transmutation of his treatise into a theatrical enactment, a theatrical negotiation of justice fundamentally at odds with any conceptual explication or philosophical systemization. Benjamin, in other words, undercuts the treatise's formal delimitations and dwells on its mediality—more a happening than a doing, more an event than an act. What emerges again and again in Benjamin as in the other works is a singularly negotiated relation between poetics and ethics, modes of presentation (*Darstellung*) and modes of morality (*Sittlichkeit*), a relation that Benjamin enacts by turning the thematically problematized politics of pure means into a rhetorically staged poetics of pure means—all to the effect of that somewhat different ethics.

Benjamin's essay is next put into dialogue with Sophocles' *Antigone,* in which the conflict between human law and divine justice (Creon's *nomoi* and Antigone's *dikē*) is similarly negotiated. It is this conflict between law and justice, the unrecognizability of justice, that ultimately emerges as an epistemic problem and as such relates Benjamin's treatise to the subsequent chapter on the film *Germany in Autumn* (1977–78), one of the most controversial omnibus projects of the luminaries of the New German Cinema. *Germany in Autumn* (directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Werner Herzog, and Volker Schlöndorff, among others) was shot in immediate response to the events of what was later called the "German Autumn": namely the kidnapping and murder of industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer by the terrorist Baader-Meinhof group, and the political crisis it triggered in the autumn of 1977. What is the relationship between mourning and the dynamics of societal inclusion and exclusion—between the public act of grieving for certain members of the socius, their stylization as "martyr" and paradigmatic "human," and the denial of public grieving as a means of excluding others, allegedly subhuman beings (*Untermenschen*)?

Within the context of this question, the chapter probes the cinematic enactment of the confrontation between the political violence of the German state and the political violence of the Baader-Meinhof group—partly in light of the "play within a play" structure of the film that takes place as a proposed television production of Sophocles' *Antigone.* But then, what kind of judgmental dynamics does *Germany in Autumn* bring about? What is the ethical stand brought to bear *beyond* the reenactment of ostensible friend-foe dichotomies of the state terror from above and the Baader-Meinhof group's terror from below? While it seems that the terrorists, in the name of natural law, and the state, in the name of

positive law (paralleling the confrontation between Antigone and Creon), seek to arrogate to themselves the role of the proprietor of justice—negotiated with respect to "the human"—the filmmakers do not walk into that trap. Indeed, if one closely examines the cinematic texture and, concretely, its positions or positings (*Setzungen*) regarding the state and the terrorists, it appears that such statements are frequently left in suspense or de-posed (*ent-setzt*), much in the sense of the Benjaminian deposing (*Entsetzung*). That is to say, *Germany in Autumn*'s cinematic montage, rather than evoking simplistic identifications with preestablished political sides, produces a space of poetic ambiguities and blurred transitions, thereby unsettling identifiable political positions and undermining each political side's possessive claim to justice. What instead ceaselessly surges to the surface is an ethical momentum distinct yet not definable—perhaps deeply moral yet clearly beyond any socially established system of morals. The filmmakers' ethical intervention, rather than succumbing to the discursive dynamics of state violence and terrorist violence, comes into being as a result of the abysmal architectonics so characteristic of the film, one that portrays neither the state nor the terrorists as antagonistic political forces but focuses on individuals instead, single human beings who, *qua* humans, defy conceptual appropriation.

If *Germany in Autumn* confronts us with the question of the film's ethical stance, a question raised explicitly by the filmmakers themselves,[20] then the answer here, as in previous chapters, revolves around the relation between ethics and poetics—that is, the film's particular way of cinematically enacting an ethical concern. In terms of genre, *Germany in Autumn* clearly draws on the tradition of the *Autorenkino,* often translated as "cinema of *auteurs,*" a genre that regards "the director as a film's creator" and identifies a film as an expression of that director's artistic vision.[21] As in the other works discussed here, this conception of a genre is unsettled in the light of specific thematic challenges, foremost among them the claim to justice raised by the terrorists and the German state alike. It is a challenge that seems to have prompted the filmmakers not to address the complexities raised by the struggle between the

20. Alf Brustellin, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Bernhard Sinkel, "*Germany in Autumn:* What Is the Film's Bias?" in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices,* ed. and trans. Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 133 ("Was ist die Parteilichkeit des Films?" in *Deutschland im Herbst: Terrorismus im Film,* ed. Petra Kraus et al. [Munich: Schriftenreihe Münchner Filmzentrum, 1997], 81).

21. Alexander Kluge, one of the filmmakers of *Germany in Autumn* and a distinguished proponent of the *Autorenfilm,* "developed the idea of the director as *Autor* by contrasting the new German film with what he termed a *Zutatenfilm* (recipe film). The 'recipe film' was a typical industry product, made up of ingredients such as stars, ideas, directors, technicians and scriptwriters which the producer simply went out and purchased according to requirements." By contrast, the *auteur* directors "exercised a far greater degree of authorial control than industrial production methods normally permitted." They were to "retain control over the direction and entire production process" and were provided with total financial and artistic control, all of which was to enable the development of a distinctly personal style (Julia Knight, "New German Cinema," http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415409285/resources/newgermancinema.pdf).

German state and the terrorists on their own—as individual *auteur* filmmakers—but collectively—as a group of eleven—and in the form of a film-collage. It appears to be precisely the *ethical* inadequacy of conventional auteur theory (which always seems to imply some sort of partisanship of the *auteur*) that *Germany in Autumn* eludes by means of its unconventional treatment of genre, its suspension of the laws of genre. Accordingly, the undermining of aesthetic prescriptions resonates with a certain undermining of moral prescriptions: the aesthetic specificity of each contribution's mode of presentation appears to correspond to the particularity of the human beings portrayed in the film, irrespective of political allegiances and moral discourses.

Not surprisingly, such eclectic montage is incompatible with the idea of promoting a moral stand translatable into conventional political action. *Germany in Autumn* presents a collage that crosses through fictional and documentary modes alike by including interviews, archival footage from the Third Reich, fictional reenactments, and so forth. Contrary to the conventional practice of continuity editing, the film emphasizes temporal and spatial ruptures as much as it stresses its own stylistic heterogeneity. While the diverse segments are formed into a broad narrative, the film lacks stylistic as well as ethical consistency. As little as the individual characters' claim to justice, in its contextual specificity, can be subsumed under any preexisting *moral* law, so little can the film's poetic enactment be subsumed under a preexisting *aesthetic* law. Once again, laws of genre find themselves undercut to the effect of an ethics inherently tied to mediality; once again, the particularity of an ethical concern seems not merely to be reflected but indeed to be *generated* by an idiosyncratic poetic approach.

What surfaces over and over is an ethical momentum that each of these works seems to reject on the level of explicit discussion, all the while invoking it on the level of performance as that strangely elusive—poetically induced—other ethics.[22] Hannah Arendt's literary acts of *trans*-figuration relentlessly aspire toward a *beyond—beyond* the discursive boundaries of historiographical reconstruction, *beyond* the invincible logic of totalitarian politics, and toward a seemingly supersensuous sphere that statistical data, as much as conceptual language, appears unable to contain. Benjamin's peculiar mode of presentation (the constant propositions asserted only to be rhetorically eroded) brings about or stages, *beyond* any "critique" of violence, the very pure means, the very ethics "of a different kind" he talks about. And the film *Germany in Autumn* raises the question of whether

22. Also according to Hegel, tragedies *reflect* as much as *generate* "moral understanding and comprehension"; they function as "eternal *models* of the moral *concept*" (die ewigen *Muster* des sittlichen *Begriffs*) (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion,* in *Werke,* ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969], 17:132, italics and translation mine); see also Klaus-Dieter Eichler, "Über den Umgang mit Erzählungen bei Platon und Aristoteles," in *Narrative Ethik: Das Gute und das Böse erzählen,* ed. Karen Joisten (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 117–34, 134.

the filmmakers' ethical stance is ultimately brought to bear *beyond* the discussed discourses of political violence, whether the film's cinematic economy may precisely be one seeking to *trans*-gress the gnomic sphere of conflicting political concepts and conceptions.

Of course, Arendt does, after all, write historiography, but she effectively rejects the conventional historiographical convention of *sine ira et studio.* Of course, Benjamin does write a treatise, yet he eludes the conclusiveness of this end-oriented, purposive genre. Of course, *Germany in Autumn* is deeply rooted in the tradition of the cinema of *auteurs,* yet it resists the genre's characteristic authorial bias. And of course, as we shall see, Heiner Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin* is indebted to the tradition of bourgeois drama, yet Müller unremittingly destabilizes the genre's dialectical efficacy rhetorically. In each of these cases it seems—and that is the point here—that the specific implementation of poetic space provides not simply a mere correlative but the very conditions for that ethics of a different kind to come into being.

It is in this vein that the question of genre emerges as crucial in *Germania Death in Berlin,* insofar as Müller tackles the involuted German history of violence, spanning from the mythical time of the Nibelungs over Tacitus's *Germania* all the way to the division of twentieth-century postwar Germany. At the same time, however, Müller curiously cancels out or deposes (*entsetzt*) these morally charged historical trajectories poetically. What at the outset appears as clearly discernible discourses of victims and perpetrators, established oppositions of friends and foes—often discussed with regard to the paradigmatic "human" and its others—soon succumbs to chaos, turmoil, and a persistent conflation of political oppositions, of betrayers and betrayed, guilt and innocence. And as political discourses begin to falter, the basis for moral judgments evaporates. This, however (and it is here that the question of genre comes in), essentially concurs with Müller's dramaturgy: if bourgeois drama was characteristic with respect to variants of intersubjective confrontation, Müller's subject is deprived of the enemy. Instead of the presentation of dialectically or oppositionally evolving action along the lines of political or moral discourses, the front lines are now rhetorically rendered diffuse and eviscerated. In accordance with this absence of specifiable duels and identifiable antagonisms, in accordance with the erratic nature of "the enemy," the "theatrical" thrusts the "dramatic" aside; that is, the performative belies the constative, belies whatever discernible dramatic progress there may be. Needless to say, such performative displacement implies fundamental ethical correlatives: for as the determination of and the fight against an adversary is thwarted, politically accountable positions collapse into massacre, unstrategic brutality, and internecine struggles.

If one were to describe the link between ethics and poetics in Müller's *Germania,* then it seems as if the poetic efficacy of *Germania* is the very means that first employs and then suspends the genre-specific parameters of bourgeois drama as prescribed by its tradition of dramatic conflict and conflictional depth. This poetic means—a

morally uncommitted, pure means, to be sure—aims at an exploration of the concrete complexities characterizing the situation of the two Cheruscan brothers (Flavus and Arminius) in Tacitus's *Germania* or the Nazi and his Communist brother in their respectively failed careers in the East German and the National Socialist regime or the Socialist Young Bricklayer and his ambivalent understanding of socialism. Rather than demonstrating loyalty to any conceivable moral position, Müller aspires, through intensive scrutiny of the cultural text of violence, to do justice to his characters in their specific situations and to address their individual suffering. He achieves a writerly stance ascribed less to, in Müller's own words, "established and socially integrated morals" than to a strangely elusive ethics of the singular.[23]

In line with, though distinctly different from, Heiner Müller, the nexus between ethics and poetics, between modes of morality and modes of presentation, proves to be pivotal in Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony." On the surface, we are, as in Müller, dealing with an unsparing description of extreme violence—that is, the meticulous depiction of an atrocious torture and execution machine in the presence of a prisoner who is about to be executed. It is unmistakable that Kafka's is a horrific, ghastly, and morally repulsive story. This surely is a perspective suggested by the story itself, through the skeptical traveler with whom, at least initially, we are encouraged to identify. Yet what unsettles our indignation and precipitates a gnawing feeling of discontent is the poetic composition, the style of the text. It is not only the unperturbed officer—the execution machine's operator—whose explanations appear ominously ordinary and obsessed with detail as he elaborates, for example, on the execution apparatus's harrow, which inscribes the sentence on the condemned prisoner's skin in the course of twelve hours. It is the traveler as well, who, though initially expressing opposition to the procedure ("I am an opponent of this procedure"), eventually revokes his unequivocal moral stance in the name of an allegedly appropriate impartiality. Time and again, Kafka's narrative appears remarkable in its plain, matter-of-fact, direct, straightforward, that is, its "prosaic," language, which seems to make the horrific situation apparent in the first place. Frequently, what turns out to be "self-evident" within the logic of the penal system is expressed as self-evident, natural, and ordinary in Kafka's prose.[24] Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the traveler, who at first protested against the execution's cruelty and announced his opposition, now shows reservations about any form of protest and recalls how "ticklish" it is "to intervene . . . in other people's affairs." The traveler's reticence, his tacit complicity, appears distressing precisely because, from his perspective, "the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable."[25]

23. Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht,* 246.

24. Franz Kafka, "In der Strafkolonie," in *Ein Landarzt und andere Drucke zu Lebzeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer TB Verlag, 1994), 161–95, here 185.

25. Ibid., 175.

Regarding the relation between ethics and poetics, Kafka's detached rhetoric emerges as an indispensable basis for the ferocious violence to be rendered readable.[26] As in Müller, the unvarnished presentation of violence appears to be the very groundwork for the possibility of its investigation. Kafka's style, his narrative "means," as it were, inhibits the blinding gesture of moral speech and thus allows for an analysis that does not present the reader with foregone conclusions, predetermined narrative "ends," but instead induces his or her own particular insights. It is here, against the background of "ethics," that the issue of materiality once again takes center stage. Once again, genre emerges with all its weight, its narrative ramifications and semantic repercussions, its bearing on how the ethical is rendered manifest. If one were to classify Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" in terms of genre theory, one would be dealing with a *story,* more specifically, a piece of *prose* fiction. Our characterization of Kafka's writing as plain, direct, matter-of-fact, and straightforward already captures the "prosaic" in Kafka and its corresponding inhibition of moral gesture.[27] The plainness of the "prosaic" seems to be furthered by the genre-specific indeterminacy of the "story" (*Erzählung*), whose definition reads as a series of negations:

> Its laws of form are often circumscribed . . . negatively: the story is shorter, less related to the real world, less rich in characters and less complex in plot and substance than the novel; not as concise and suggestive as the sketch and anecdote; in contrast to the novella less sharply molded, less entangled and developed, not as strictly centered around one or two main events and surprising moments; less

26. Allegorically, the reading of Kafka's story presents itself in a peculiar light if contrasted with the scenes of reading discussed in the story itself. As the prisoner reads the inscriptions engraved on his body, and as the traveler tries to decipher the scriptures of law presented to him by the officer, we, as readers of Kafka's story, are engaged in deciphering his scripture. And just as we struggle to decipher Kafka's writing, the traveler takes pains with the deciphering of the scriptures of law held in front of him. What makes the act of reading so hard for the traveler is, of course, the aesthetic ornamentation of the scriptures of law (the aesthetic suspension or deposing [*Entsetzung*] of the juridical positings). "It's very ingenious, but I can't make it out," he complains (Kafka, "In der Strafkolonie," 172). And of course, it is the very same aesthetic ornamentation (the same deposing [*Entsetzung*]) that makes it so hard for the prisoner to decipher the inscriptions carved onto his body. "Reason comes to the most dull-witted" only at the sixth hour of torture, only at the sixth hour of torturous reading, a process that then proceeds for another six hours till the prisoner's death (173). As much as this allegory of reading suggests itself, it must fundamentally fail in the face of a certain discrepancy, a discrepancy that makes all the difference in Kafka's story. For while the juridical scriptures presented by the officer fall under the *general* dictum "Guilt is never to be doubted," irrespective of a particular delict, Kafka's narrative does not follow such a general axiom, such interpretative prejudgment (168). Whereas, in other words, in the penal colony every sentence yields to a pre-scribed juris-diction, a preestablished ethical framework that categorically excludes an ethics of an-*other* order, Kafka's writing presents itself as more obstinate. It is thus that we, Kafka's readers, are in a fundamentally different position from that of the reading characters in Kafka's story: while the deciphering of Kafka's story may appear torturous, it does not surrender to any preconceived metanarrative; its interpretative ends remain untethered.

27. The *OED* defines "prose," among other definitions, as "straightforward, straight, direct, . . . plain, simple, or matter-of-fact."

> pointed and less consistently composed toward the end than the short story; not relating to areas of the unreal and miraculous as fairy tale and legend.[28]

It is such indeterminateness or rhetorical withdrawal, such genre-specific deposing (*Entsetzung*) that brings about Kafka's narrative "ethics." The literary genre of the story (*Erzählung*) is in its formal guidelines as indeterminate as Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" is in its moral prescriptions. While the charged content of the story threatens to be absorbed by moral outrage (or rather to occasion such outrage in readers), Kafka forestalls this danger by bringing his morally uncommitted quest to bear and by problematizing and negotiating without concluding and without delivering judgments. Thus Kafka's writing appears to invoke an ethics that purely communicates itself—narrative means that insist neither on foreseeable ends nor on conceivable effects. The stylistic efficacy of the "Penal Colony" precipitates the deposing (*Entsetzung*) or undoing of conventional ethics,[29] a dynamic that provides the basis for intense analysis practiced to the point of "extra-ordinary" concretion,[30] a dynamic lending itself, once again, to an ethics of the concrete, the singular.

Toward a Poetics of Pure Means

What, we finally and once again shall ask, does an encounter of such different thinkers as Arendt, Kafka, Benjamin, the directors of *Germany in Autumn,* and Müller show? What can be taken from a constellation of modes as varied as political theory, fiction, cultural criticism, film, and drama? Does this conjunction offer any insight that could not be gained in the context of, say, a monograph on film, literature, or political philosophy? Clearly, each of the works discussed here tackles a particular ethical concern within the confines of a "medium." Yet, if with Aristotle's *Poetics* a tradition began that "systematically and prescriptively equated medium with means,"[31] then "medium" (as specified in this book) no longer functions as a means or instrument toward a thematic end. Strictly speaking, medium does not "function" at all and follows no purpose or goal other than its own mediatic force—that ethical force that forges itself in relation to explicitly discussed conceptions of ethics and displaces them. It is a force that is less the *result* of assertions, statements, or

28. *Metzler Literaturlexikon,* 138.

29. Newspaper critic Hans Beilhack called Kafka a "lecher of horror" (*Lüstling des Entsetzens*) who does not avoid "even the repulsive and disgusting." Beilhack was reacting to a reading in Munich in November 1916, when Kafka presented his story in the context of a literary lecture series before a small audience. Reportedly, several members of the audience swooned in consequence of hearing the described atrocities (see Peter-André Alt, *Franz Kafka: Der ewige Sohn; Eine Biographie* [Munich: Beck, 2005], 477).

30. Kafka, "In der Strafkolonie," 189.

31. Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 101; Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. Gerald Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970).

propositions than, as I have tried to outline, the *effect* of particular poetic configurations (that is, the effect of the particularly employed economy of a medium).

If this study, then, embarks on an exploration of the cinematic infrastructure of the film *Germany in Autumn,* whose stylistic heterogeneity seems to reverberate with the ungraspability of "the human," or if it seeks to fathom Benjamin's so unfathomable text "Toward a Critique of Violence," which appears to enact the unattainability of justice, or if, to name yet a third example, it probes into Arendt's historiography of totalitarian politics and that pervasive moment of narrative friction that appears to set itself against the cogent logicality of her object of research, totalitarian politics, if thus the study again and again investigates how each (theoretical, literary, cinematic) text's ethical force is brought about in ways distinctly different from all the others, the potential criticism still remains that I simply juxtapose different materials rather than integrate them, that I don't articulate conceptual links but content myself with adjacencies and contiguities. In a way, this is a fair complaint. It is true that the links between genres and media here are links of proximity rather than integration, of contact rather than synthesis. The reason for this, as I have tried to show, lies in the very nature of that other ethics, an ethics that defies conceptual integration of any sort.

While we earlier used the formula of a "poetics of pure means" to describe the rhetorical efficacy of the works under discussion, it goes without saying at this point that such a "poetics of pure means" might similarly describe what is at issue in my own performance, my own commentary, my own approach. This is an approach that attempts relentless readjustment so as to find "pure" ways of addressing a certain work, "pure" meaning modes of addressing a text's specificity, of "doing justice" to its idiosyncrasy. It is an approach, a poetics in constant need of decontaminating itself from preconceived methodological agendas that already anticipate their conclusions, their "insights," their narrative "ends," from the very beginning, a poetics that seeks to circumvent the temptation of reducing works of the most diverse materiality—under the pretense of thematic similarities—to "immaterial phantoms of meaning."[32]

Hence, my discussions of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt probe their philosophical depths and intricacies; yet I also try to be attentive to the rhetorical registers of these theoretical texts. Chiastically reversed, the literary texts by Franz Kafka and Heiner Müller, and the cinematic presentation of *Germany in Autumn,* are read not only with an eye to their literary and cinematic traits; my readings systematically seek to unfold their philosophical and theoretical implications as well.

Rather than treating these works as if they were operating on the same level of simple content, the essays gathered here aim to address the specificity of each genre and the singularity of each text. At the same time, this study examines how the

32. Duncan Campbell, "Reading Phonography, Inscribing Interdisciplinarity," in *Critical Studies: Cultural Studies, Interdisciplinarity, and Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 131–45, here 132.

differences *among* media are played out *within* each work as an immanent conflict of structures. This maneuver leads to the kernel of the study, an analysis of how narratives across genres seek to capitalize meaning, and how such capitalization of meaning displays its own limits when it comes to the question of ethics. At issue is an ethics that, beyond the accumulation of moral injunctions, emanates from the fissures, chasms, and interstices of poetic enactments, an ethics that evolves as elusive effect, whose epistemic resistance this project cannot overcome but perhaps (or that would be the hope) can invoke.