

Chapter Title: Character Armour and Mobile Warfare

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Book Title: Alexander Kluge

Book Subtitle: Raw Materials for the Imagination

Book Editor(s): Tara Forrest

Published by: Amsterdam University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt46n2tx.26>

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Television Interviews

Character Armour and Mobile Warfare

Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller

AK: On the one hand you have a tractor as an invention, a caterpillar tread and machinery for hauling, it can travel cross-country and level out ditches and it can do things with the earth in a specific fashion, and secondly, you have a firing platform, an artillery emplacement that can move around, and thirdly a tank. If you take the components of a tank, what interests you there?

HM: Why I'm so fascinated by that is a question I ask myself. Why am I fascinated by the word armour, armour-plating?

AK: And also the workers that make it.

HM: It must have something to do with a need for armour, a subjective need for armour-plating. That's also why it's a dream image, the tank.

AK: The dream image is getting heavier. The first tanks are light.

HM: The other important factor is speed, though these days it's no longer that, of course. But in World War II it was still an image of speed.

AK: Sixty, eighty kilometres an hour they could travel.

HM: I myself didn't actually have anything to do with them directly. I did military training, but the war was nearing its end and we only once had contact with the enemy. That was with Soviet tanks. Actually it started when we were already on the way into American activity. Our officers, understandably, preferred to be captured by the Americans rather than the Russians, so we were marching from Wismar in the direction of Schwerin. We had anti-tank grenade launchers and relatively old rifles, they were Norwegian front-loaders.

AK: Could you fire an anti-tank grenade?

HM: I was taught to do that, yes.

AK: What is an anti-tank grenade-launcher?

HM: If only I knew now. I've repressed it so much, that's the strange thing. I was given the complete 'werewolf' training, and we practised with anti-tank grenade launchers. They were relatively easy to handle, but I can't describe it for you.

AK: Did you fire them?

HM: Only practice shots.

[...]

AK: What does a tank mean? Speed? A racing car is speedy.

HM: There are perhaps three things: speed, protection and imprisonment. You probably know what the soldiers say about tanks. From the beginning they were human canned food in there, always with the prospect of being fried. There were three things: speed, protection, but at the same time imprisonment.

AK: If you go back to Rome or Shakespeare, where do you find something of that sort?

HM: Coriolanus has armour-plating.

AK: As a man? Or do you mean the general and his personal bodyguards? The 'tortoise', where the shields are combined together, also makes a kind of tank.

HM: But the strange thing about Coriolanus is something else. Brecht couldn't get a handle on it in his adaptation, because he was aiming at something else in his play. Brecht actually wanted to write a Stalin play, in other words a play about the necessity and superfluosity of the hero, the protagonist. That was the picture Brecht had of Stalin, along the lines of that lovely definition of him: 'the meritorious murderer of the people'.

AK: Did he write that?

HM: He didn't write it, but he said it. But there is, I think, a note in the archive. It was meant very ambivalently.

AK: 'Meritorious' was not meant ironically?

HM: He didn't mean it at all ironically. 'Murderer' was meant quite seriously too. With Coriolanus the remarkable point, which he couldn't grasp, is that this tank Coriolanus is knocked off by a speech of his mother. There's something in that. A woman couldn't have invented a tank. That's a thoroughly male defensive move, armour-plating. Women don't need armour-plating.

[...]

AK: Maybe if you describe for me what the moon is. It's of course the satellite of a planet. How would you characterise something like that, just try to enter into the planetary system.

HM: The first thing would be that the moon is something that you shouldn't set foot on. First all the other planets, then the moon. The moon is something that one shouldn't colonise, that one shouldn't touch, you should just leave it the way it is, or let it go the way it goes. I'm speaking now in an associative way [...]

AK: But how would you begin to talk about the moon, would you begin with the sun, would you begin with the planets, would you begin with the stars? You've just begun by saying one should not set foot on it. I think that's very consistent, but just try to describe, say for a stranger, what it is.

HM: The moon is something you need in order to go to sleep. It's something you have to have when it's time to sleep.

AK: Have you ever actually written about the moon?

HM: Yes I have, yes.

AK: Where?

HM: There's an early poem that was never published, because I didn't think it was any good. I'll try to recollect. Let me think for a moment. 'The moon had not yet risen', it's a very early poem and probably bad, but I'll say it just for that reason.

The moon had not yet risen
 Three were not to see it again
 (It's about an execution)
 When their bodies swung from the branches
 The moon was lovely over the mountains.

That's one view of the moon. I was later completely taken aback when I read a text by Werner Riegel. He was a friend of Ruehmkorf, long since forgotten. But I've never forgotten these two lines, because I thought they were just fantastic.

The moon over Poland is lovely
For the duration of a shot in the head.

The second thing is that my mother was 'moonstruck' for a while, that is she used to walk in her sleep, even over rooftops. And then there is another connection, which might be completely abstruse. My first idea about the world was – that was a while back, of course – that somewhere there's a paling fence and the world ends there. That was connected with my first experience of politics, which was quite child-like. In 1934, I think, Hindenburg died, and I remember that there was this house up a bit of a slope. There was a fence, and the loos were outside, I remember that very fondly. There were three houses for plop-loos, and in one of them there were two. One for adults, one for children, so you could crap next to your uncle or next to your mother or whatever. That is, next to your mother never happened, at best it was your uncle. But if the need arose you sat together, it was just taken for granted. And then there was the fence behind the loos. And I remember, in 1934, it was towards evening, the bells were ringing in this village, and all the grown-ups were standing by this fence. Opposite, a fair way off, there was a similar house. They were standing by the fence too, and the bells were ringing because Hindenburg had died. And that was really strange, that was actually my first experience of politics or history. I was aware that there was something that meant a hiatus for the grown-ups. Something had finished, a kind of protection or [...]

AK: A sense of security [...]

HM: [...] a sense of security had gone, and there was an unease, a fear, and everybody was standing by the fence and listening to the bells.

AK: And what has this to do with the moon?

HM: For me it has something to do with the moon. I don't know why, I can't give a reason for it. The moon was something upsetting, but also something safe.

Translated by Philip Thomson