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HORROR

Sex, selfhood and the corpse of the
German past

Jörg Buttgereit's *Nekromantik* (1987)
and *Nekromantik 2* (1991)

Arguing for the thematic complexity
and technical sophistication of Jörg
Buttgereit's controversial "necro-
porn-horrors" *Nekromantik* and
Nekromantik 2, **Linnie Blake** makes
the case that they "share a set of
artistic and ideological concerns...
usually associated with the canonical
auteurs of the Young German Cinema
and the New German Cinema of... the
1960s and 1970s."



*We are separated from
yesterday not by a yawning abyss, but by the same
situation.*
—Camus

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Everyone bears the guilt for everything, but if everyone knew that, we would have paradise on earth.

—Dostoevsky

Surprising as it may seem, these two epigraphs, used in the opening and closing titles of Alexander Kluge's pioneering work of Young German Cinema *Abschied von Gestern* (*Yesterday Girl*, 1966), provide an entirely apposite introduction to this piece—a brief exploration of the work of Jörg Buttgereit, the controversial Berlin horror director who, in the period surrounding the reunification of Germany, produced a number of hugely controversial and widely banned studies in visceral horror and sexual perversion, including *Nekromantik* (1987), *Der Todesking* (*The Death King*, 1990), *Nekromantik 2* (1991) and *Schramm* (1993).



Artwork for Barrel Entertainment's US

For although Buttgereit's much-banned "necro-porn-horrors" have been frequently dismissed as no more than "disappointingly witless" and "morbidly titillating" attempts "to disgust the most jaded conceivable audience,"^[1] these films are not only more thematically complex and technically sophisticated than is popularly supposed, but share a set of artistic and ideological concerns more usually associated with the

[L'aldilà \(1981\)](#)

[Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* \(1979\)](#)

[Agustín Villaronga's *Tras el cristal* \(1986\)](#)

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DVD release of *Nekromantik* and the New German Cinema of the turbulent years of the 1960s and 1970s: specifically Hans Jurgen Syberberg in the first generation and Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the second.

In the short piece that follows, I will argue that Buttgerit's distinctively alienated musings on the existential isolation of the desiring German subject, his libidinally ambiguous re-animation of the deeply repressed historical past and his highly self-reflexive plays on cinema's capacity for the dissemination and reproduction of regressive ideologies, position him not only as a horror director *par excellence* but a major contributor to recent cinematic art in Germany. His works exist not merely to shock, as is popularly supposed, but function as considered and often playful explorations of one of the core subjects of recent German film—*Die Unbewaltigte Vergangenheit*—the past that has not been adequately dealt with.



**A dark irrationality:
From Goethe to the New German Cinema**

Like Syberberg before him, Buttgerit is a director who engages creatively with that strand of Romantic irrationalism that has lain at the heart of German culture since long before the nation's first

(1942)

[Roman Polanski's *Le Locataire* \(1976\)](#)

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unification in the 1870s— an irrationalism that once manifested itself in Goethe's rendering of the Faust legend, Hoffman's tales of the *Unheimlich* in prose and, much later, in the horror tales of Weimar cinema. Existing somewhere between the nightmare world of the ghost train, the crazy logic of dreams and the representational strategies of avant-garde or experimental cinema, Buttgerit's films joyfully participate in this irrationality— especially through the frequent inclusion of lengthy or repeated sequences of highly perplexing viscerality.



In *Nekromantik*, for example, we are invited to share the hero Rob's (Daktari Lorenz) visions of a white-clad, long-limbed woman striding across a rural landscape, carrying a severed head in a box before removing it to play a game of catch.

Such a sequence finds a surreal echo in *Nekromantik 2*, where the ill-fated hero Mark (Mark Reeder) dreams of being buried up to his neck, having his own head placed first beneath a box and that box being stamped upon by a spike-heeled shoe.

In the latter film, moreover, the heroine Monika (listed in the credits as "Monika M"), who decapitates Mark during sex and replaces his head with that of the decomposing Rob, delivers a peculiarly kitsch torch song where, in black cocktail dress and accompanied by an androgynous blonde pianist on an "Eterna"

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piano, she sings a love song to Death. All this while a giant, blood-spattered skull revolves in the background. Surreal visions of death, desire and love thus coalesce in Buttgerit in a strange dream-logic that self-consciously questions the certitudes of rational discourse—specifically those discourses of history that proclaim that the corpse of the past is buried, and must stay firmly in its place.

Like the New German Cinema before it, Buttgerit's *Nekromantik* films thus dig into the place of burial and engage with the rotting fruits of the past. And we the audience are complicit in this process, undertaking



a visual embrace of the corpse through the very act of watching the film. In so doing, we too are forced to engage with the self-same question that faced post-Oberhausen[2] German directors: why, in Thomas Elsaesser's words, "[i]nstead of confronting this past, Germans preferred to bury it." [3]

If Syberberg had the quintessentially irrational Germanic unconscious, and the bloody deeds perpetuated in its name, rise from the grave in the guise of the Fuhrer in *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler: a Film from Germany*, 1977), then in the *Nekromantik* films Buttgerit would undertake a considerably more visceral, but no less politically serious, act of resurrection. For both directors, the question was the same: why did their nation feel so

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"spiritually disinherited and dispossessed"; why was Germany "a country without a homeland, without '*Heimat*'?"[4]

**Sexuality, cinema, sight:
How to remember differently**



Throughout his films, Buttgerit concertedly associates the act of photographing or filming an object with death itself, using Super-8, 16mm and 35mm film, video, polaroids, stills-photography and television

pictures in the construction of his representations of the dead and those who love them. In his deployment of necrophiles as romantic leads, and in his depiction of sexual acts with the dead, moreover, he repeatedly asserts that at any moment in time the past and the present are locked together in a deathly embrace, an embrace that we can only make sense of with recourse to memory. And memory, for Buttgerit, is itself visually encoded in the photograph and the film.

Accordingly, visual representations of the dead abound in Buttgerit's films. In *Nekromantik 2*, for example, we see Monika's photograph album of dead relatives, her hilarious "family photographs" of herself and her dead lover sitting innocently on the sofa and her newspaper pictures of Rob prior to his suicide. In both *Nekromantik* films, moreover, we are forced to look upon numerous

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representations of the corpse as object of erotic desire. Such pictures, of course, are not only attempts to record what has been and what is no longer (the living person now dead), but objects which, when looked upon, effectively interject the absent dead into the living present.

Such an interjection, for Buttgerit as for Roland Barthes, transfigures the image itself, whereby the visual representation of the past ceases to be a memory and becomes a counter-memory—a means of remembering otherwise.^[5] This is, of course, another aspect of Buttgerit's attempts to revivify the corpse of the past, whereby visual representation and memory are indivisibly linked and the otherwise absent and forgotten become both present and differently remembered.



Thus Buttgerit once more draws our gaze back to the sense of horror upon which the New German Cinema had predicated its own filmic representations of the past. In so doing, of course, he also forces us to look once more at that dark irrationality that can be seen to lie at the heart of the German subject. In this, his task is even comparable to that of Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* (1985), that nine-hour documentary consisting of interviews with survivors of

the extermination camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno and Belzec.

In his own grotesque way, Buttgereit too is attempting to bring the past into the present, and to indicate through visual representations that what has gone is never, in actuality, over and done with. It is a



project, in all its viscerality, that forces the audience to look at that which they would rather avoid, offering a counter-memory to Nazi cinema's elision of its own regime's bloody deeds, or the *Heimatfilms* pastoral revisionism and a highly individual affirmation of the philosophy of history and cinematic representation that emerged from the 1960s on.

This, in turn, makes Buttgereit a highly self-referential director, one who consistently re-configures the cinematic medium, and its history, in his

work. Monika and David of *Nekromantik 2*, for example, meet at an avant-garde film, a very funny parody of Louis Malle's *Mon déjeuner avec André* (*My Dinner with André*, 1981) entitled *Mon déjeuner avec Vera*, in which a man and woman feast on hard-boiled eggs whilst sitting naked at a table on the roof of a block of flats.

In *Der Tödesking*, moreover, Buttgerit also mulls upon the permeable membrane between lived reality and cinematic representation, repeatedly deploying a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* whereby the constructed nature of the seven depicted suicides is foregrounded through often amusing plays on the medium of film. The entire "Tuesday" sequence, for example, which includes a man renting a film at a video store and going home to watch it, turns out, in fact, to be a horror video, being screened in an empty room in which a body hangs dead in the background. Death, for Buttgerit, is implicit in German life, just as in *Der Tödesking* the decomposing adult corpse is implicit in the unborn child. The two are locked in an endlessly repeated cycle, a Nietzschean return, in which the tragedies of German history are endlessly enacted by and repeated in death, and that death is intimately linked to the act of filmic or photographic recording.

Suicide is painful: turning back time

All of this, of course, comes to a head (so to speak) with Rob's suicide in the final moments of *Nekromantik*. Lying on the bed he once shared with his girlfriend Betty (Beatrice Manowski), and for a brief interlude with their dead lover also, Rob masturbates his memorably tumescent penis whilst slowly disembowelling himself, cumming in an impressively colourful splatter of blood and semen, back-masked sound and



chiaroscuro lighting. Far from being gore-for-gore's sake, though, Rob's suicidal masochism seems to posit a subjectivity so wracked by sexual dysfunction, existential despair and utter isolation that, as is the case for so many of Fassbinder's ill-fated hero-protagonists, suicide is the only option.

Like Herzog, Buttgereit thus populates his films with characters that exist on the margins of society. And, like Herzog's characters, he enjoins that these "are not freaks" but "aspects of ourselves."^[6] Once more, I would argue, Buttgereit makes clear his belief that at the very heart of German subjectivity there lies a tragic will to self-destruction that manifests itself in failed relationships with the living, and a mordant, though necessary, fetishisation of the dead.

Such a cyclical model of life in death and death in life is, of course, built into the very form of Buttgereit's film texts, most significantly in the infamous scene in *Nekromantik* when Rob appears to recall a distinctively disturbing episode from his own past. Here a burly middle-aged man in ugly blue knitwear—one who looks very much like Buttgereit's own father as depicted in the six-minute short *Mein Papi* (*My Father*, 1981)—slits the throat of a fluffy black and white bunny in a distinctly industrial setting, and to the accompaniment of backward-masked industrial noise. Said rabbit is subsequently skinned and gutted and hung up by its legs whilst inter-cut footage of an autopsy of a human corpse visually echoes the scene, the insides of both creatures becoming their outsides as fur and skin are stripped away and internal organs are removed in wet and gloopy chunks.



Once again, it seems, Buttgereit is forcing us to

look at something we would rather avoid— the industrial scene of slaughter and the protagonist's acknowledged resemblance to the director's father being painfully pronounced. But quite apart from its capacity to shock, what is most extraordinary about the rabbit sequence is the fact that it is replayed (and re-played backwards) in the film's closing sequence, as Rob ejaculates blood and semen on his bed of death. The rabbit once dismembered is literally put back together again. The trauma that lay deep in Rob's past is thereby exorcised in death. In the director's words "what has been destroyed is now restored; old wounds heal and bad things turn good again."^[7] And once again, it is through the act of looking that we the audience have been traumatically stitched into this most graphic act of remembering otherwise.

The *Nekromantik* films of Jörg Buttgerit, shocking in subject matter and unflinchingly visceral in their portrayal of sex and death, are evidently important works of recent German cinema. Taking as their premise the horrors of a past prematurely buried, they serve to expose the complicity of the film medium in acts of ideological manipulation of the subject and, in turn, point to the ways in which that medium can bring about a re-sensitisation to the horrors of the past. They do so, moreover, with a wit that is both suitably mordant and perversely life-affirming— if only we can find the courage to look!

 [Linnie Blake](#)

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Images courtesy of [Barrel Entertainment](#), who distribute Jörg Buttgerit's *Nekromantik* and *Schramm* on DVD in the US. Their DVD release of *Nekromantik II* is due in June 2003.

Also of interest

Kinoeye articles on the uncomfortable legacy of Europe's recent past as a horror motif:

- [Germany's secret history](#): Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Anatomie* (*Anatomy*, 2000)
- [A closet full of brutality](#): Volker Schlöndorff's *Der Junge Törless* (*Young Torless*, 1966)
- [Dr Franju's "House of Pain" and the political cutting edge of horror](#): Georges Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes without a Face*, 1959)
- [Conspicuous consumption](#): Ulli Lommel's *Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe* (*Tenderness of the Wolves*, 1973)
- [Power, paedophilia, perdition](#): Agustín Villaronga's *Tras el cristal* (*In a Glass Cage*, 1986)
- [An adaptation with fangs](#): Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* (*Nosferatu the Vampyre*, 1979)
- [Montage, music and memory](#): *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1978)

Of more general interest:

- [German film in *Kinoeye* and on the web](#)
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About the author

Linnie Blake teaches film at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. She works predominantly on American genre cinema, particularly horror and crime. In her spare time, she raises strange children.

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Footnotes

1. Mike Ward, online review of *Nekromantik*: [Aboutcultfilm.com](http://www.aboutcultfilm.com). ▲
2. Editor's note: The Oberhausen Manifesto was a document signed at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 1962 by 26 young German directors and scriptwriters. They lambasted the path of German cinema in the 1950s, and called for more creative freedom in making radical cinema that was not dependent on commercial considerations. Their demands led to a change in the way the industry was financed by the state and paved the way for the Young German Cinema movement to emerge in the late 1960s. Key directors of Young German Cinema were Volker Schlöndorff, Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog. ▲
3. Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1989), 239. ▲

4. *Ibid*, 242. ▲

5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 79. ▲

6. Werner Herzog, interviewed in *The Guardian* (24 November 1975). ▲

7. David Kerekes, *Sex, Murder, Art: The Films of Jörg Buttgereit* (Manchester: Headpress, 1998), 39. ▲

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